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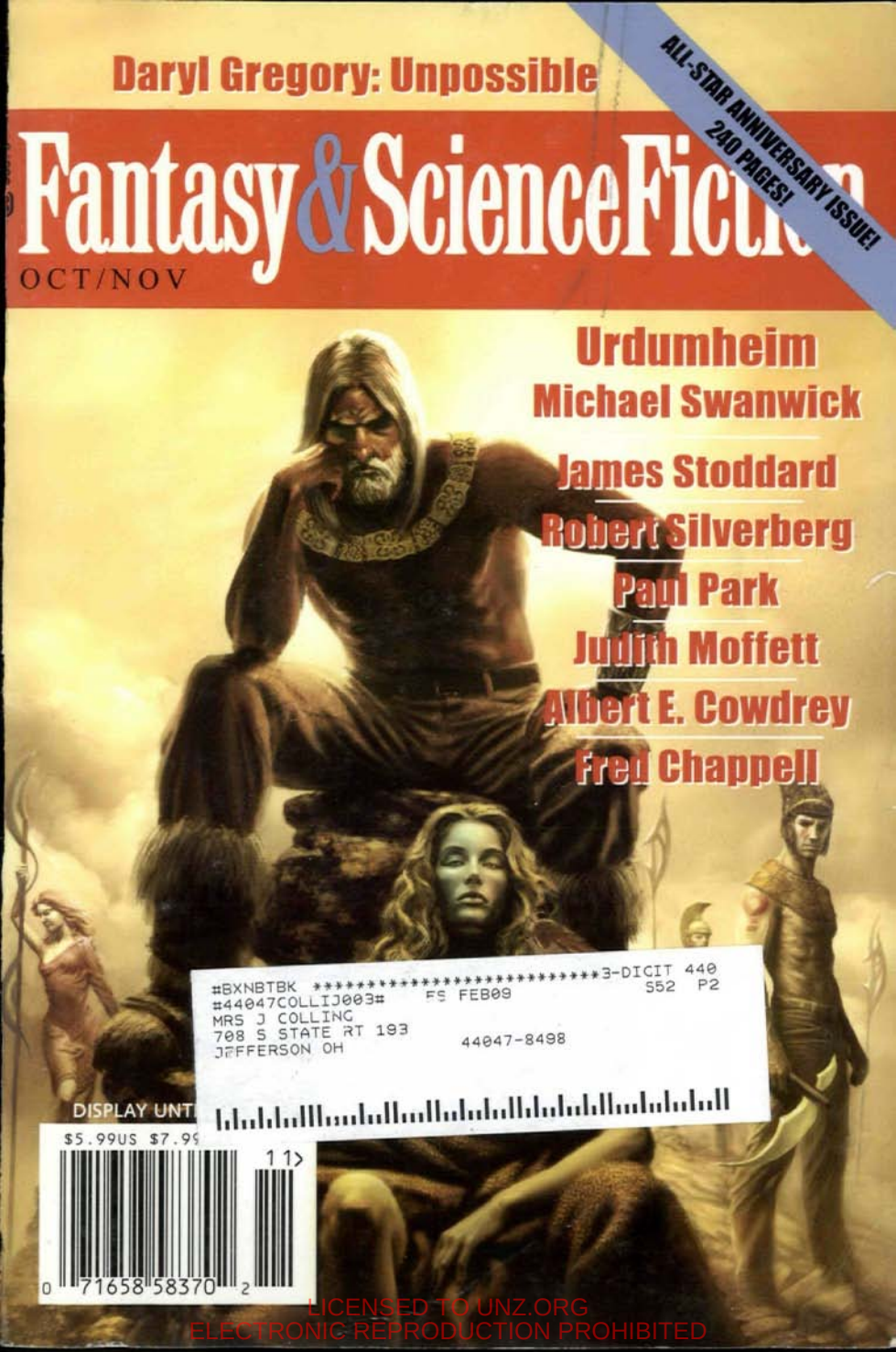

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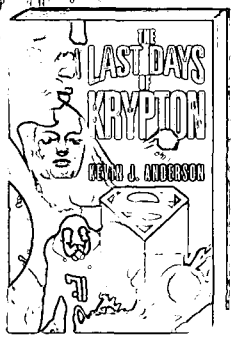

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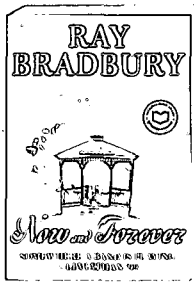

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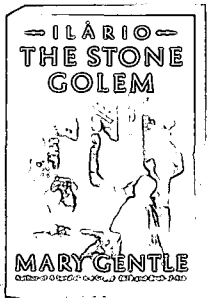

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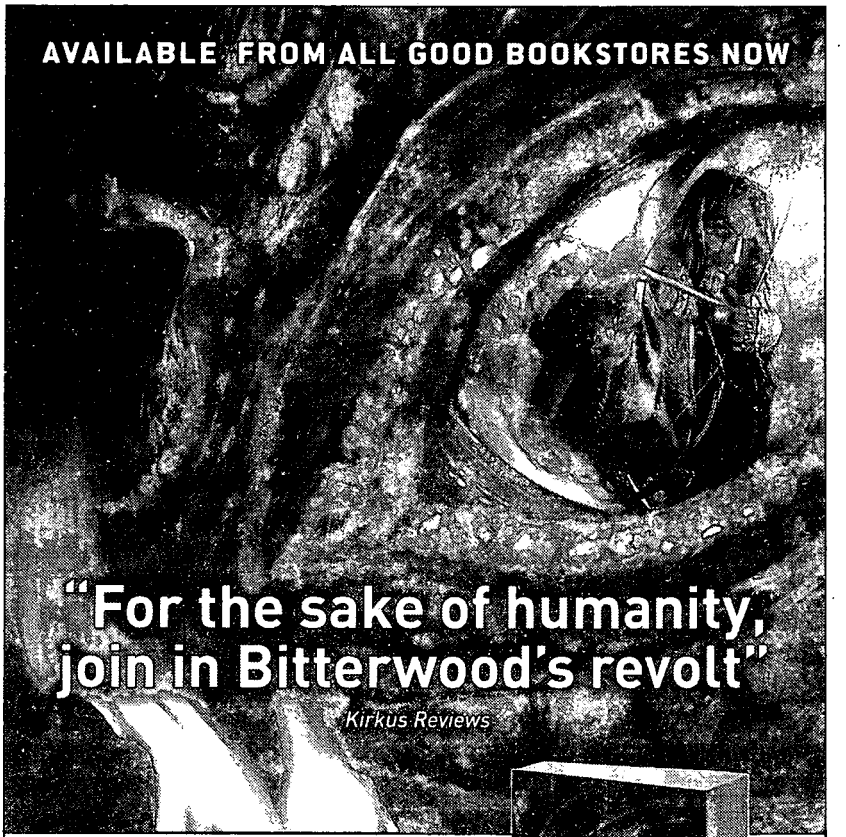

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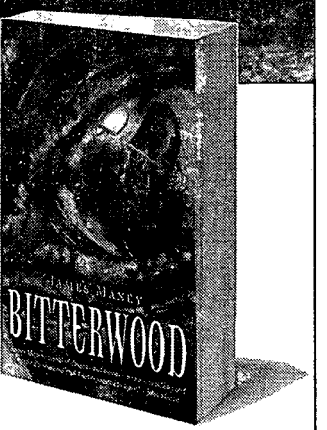

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October/November • 59th Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 113, No. 4&5, Whole No. 666, October/November 2007. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99, $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Jersey City, NJ 07307, and at additional mailing offices.
Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2007 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
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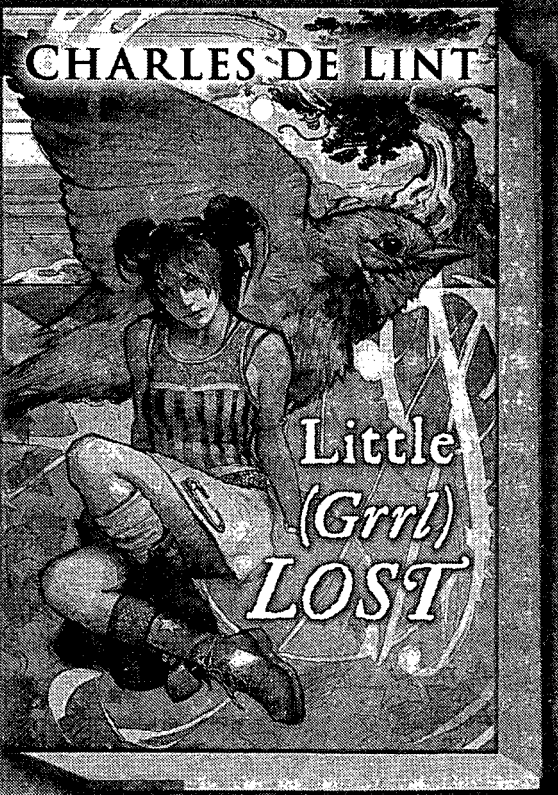

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Eight years have passed since the last time we brought you one of Mr. Silverberg's stories. And as it happens, an even fifty years have passed since we first brought you a Robert Silverberg story. (That story, "Warm Man," was by no means his first sale. The bibliography on our Website says it was his 175th.)

These brief ruminations on Mr. Silverberg's long career are entirely appropriate for this new tale, as it is one that takes us back. It is also one that reminds us oh so well of why Robert Silverberg has enjoyed such a long and successful career as a storyteller. Hop in and enjoy the ride!

Against the Current

By Robert Silverberg

ABOUT HALF PAST FOUR in the afternoon Rackman felt a sudden red blaze of pain in both his temples at once, the sort of stabbing jab that you would expect to feel if a narrow metal spike had been driven through your head. It was gone as quickly as it had come, but it left him feeling queasy and puzzled and a little frightened, and, since things were slow at the dealership just then anyway, he decided it might be best to call it a day and head for home.

He stepped out into perfect summer weather, a sunny, cloudless day, and headed across the lot to look for Gene, his manager, who had been over by the SUVs making a tally of the leftovers. But Gene was nowhere in sight. The only person Rackman saw out there was a pudgy salesman named Freitas, who so far as he recalled had given notice a couple of weeks ago. Evidently he wasn't gone yet, though.

"I'm not feeling so good and I'm going home early," Rackman announced. "If Gene's around here somewhere, will you tell him that?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Rackman."

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Rackman circled around the edge of the lot toward the staff parking area. He still felt queasy, and somewhat muddled too, with a slight headache lingering after that sudden weird stab of pain. Everything seemed just a bit askew. The SUVs, for instance — there were more of the things than there should be, considering that he had just run a big clearance on them. They were lined up like a whopping great phalanx of tanks. How come so many? He filed away a mental note to ask Gene about that tomorrow.

He turned the ignition key and the sleek silver Prius glided smoothly, silently, out of the lot, off to the nearby freeway entrance. By the time he reached the Caldecott Tunnel twenty minutes later the last traces of the pain in his temple were gone, and he moved on easily through Oakland toward the bridge and San Francisco across the bay.

At the Bay Bridge toll plaza they had taken down all the overhead signs that denoted the FasTrak lanes. That was odd, he thought. Probably one of their mysterious maintenance routines. Rackman headed into his usual lane anyway, but there was a tolltaker in the booth — why? — and as he started to roll past the man toward the FasTrak scanner just beyond he got such an incandescent glare from him that he braked to a halt.

The FasTrak toll scanner wasn't where it should be, right back of the tollbooth on the left. It wasn't there at all.

Feeling a little bewildered now, Rackman pulled a five-dollar bill from his wallet, handed it to the man, got what seemed to be too many singles in change, and drove out onto the bridge. There was very little traffic. As he approached the Treasure Island Tunnel, though, it struck him that he couldn't remember having seen any of the towering construction cranes that ran alongside the torso of the not-quite-finished new bridge just north of the old one. Nor was there any sign of them — or any trace of the new bridge itself, for that matter, when he glanced into his rearview mirror.

This is peculiar, Rackman thought. Really, really peculiar.

On the far side of the tunnel the sky was darker, as though dusk were already descending — at five-ten on a summer day? — and by the time he was approaching the San Francisco end of the bridge the light was all but gone. Even stranger, a little rain was starting to come down. Rain falls in the Bay Area in August about once every twenty years. The morning

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forecast hadn't said anything about rain. Rackman's hand trembled a little as he turned his wipers on. I am having what could be called a waking dream, Rackman thought, some very vivid hallucination, and when I'm off the bridge I better pull over to the curb and take a few deep breaths.

The skyline of the city just ahead of him looked somehow diminished, as though a number of the bigger buildings were missing. And the exit ramps presented more puzzles. A lot of stuff that had been torn down for the retrofitting of the old bridge seemed to have been put back in place. He couldn't find his Folsom Street off-ramp, but the long-gone Main Street one, which they had closed after the 1989 earthquake, lay right in front of him. He took it and pulled the Prius to curbside as soon as he was down at street level. The rain had stopped — the streets were dry, as if the rain had never been — but the air seemed clinging and clammy, not like dry summer air at all. It enfolded him, contained him in a strange tight grip. His cheeks were flushed and he was perspiring heavily.

Deep breaths, yes. Calm. Calm. You're only five blocks from your condo.

Only he wasn't. Most of the highrise office buildings were missing, all right, and none of the residential towers south of the offramp complex were there, just block after block of parking lots and some ramshackle warehouses. It was night now, and the empty neighborhood was almost completely dark. Everything was the way it had looked around here fifteen, twenty years before. His bewilderment was beginning to turn into terror. The street signs said that he was at his own corner. So where was the thirty-story building where he lived?

Better call Jenny, he thought.

He would tell her — delicately — that he was going through something very baffling, a feeling of, well, disorientation, that in fact he was pretty seriously mixed up, that she had better come get him and take him home.

But his cell phone didn't seem to be working. All he got was a dull buzzing sound. He looked at it, stunned. He felt as though some part of him had been amputated.

Rackman was angry now as well as frightened. Things like this weren't supposed to happen to him. He was fifty-seven years old, healthy, solvent, a solid citizen, owner of a thriving Toyota dealership across the

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bay, married to a lovely and loving woman. Everyone said he looked ten years younger than he really was. He worked out three times a week and ran in the Bay-to-Breakers Race every year and once in a while he even did a marathon. But the drive across the bridge had been all wrong and he didn't know where his condo building had gone and his cell phone was on the fritz, and here he was lost in this dark forlorn neighborhood of empty lots and abandoned warehouses with a wintry wind blowing — hey, hadn't it been sticky and humid a few minute ago? — on what had started out as a summer day. And he had the feeling that things were going to get worse before they got better. If indeed they got better at all.

HE SWUNG AROUND and drove toward Union Square. Traffic was surprisingly light for downtown San Francisco. He spotted a phone booth, parked nearby, fumbled a coin into the slot, and dialed his number. The phone made ugly noises and a robot voice told him that the number he had dialed was not a working number. Cursing, Rackman tried again, tapping the numbers in with utmost care. "We're sorry," the voice said again, "the number you have reached is not — "

A telephone book dangled before him. He riffled through it — Jenny had her own listing, under Burke — but though half a dozen J Burkes were in the book, five of them lived in the wrong part of town, and when he dialed the sixth number, which had no address listed, an answering machine responded in a birdlike chirping voice that certainly wasn't Jenny's. Something led him then to look for his own listing. No, that wasn't there either. A curious calmness came over him at that discovery. There were no FasTrak lanes at the toll plaza, and the dismantled freeway ramps were still here, and the neighborhood where he lived hadn't been developed yet, and neither he nor Jenny was listed in the San Francisco phone book, and therefore either he had gone seriously crazy or else somehow this had to be fifteen or even twenty years ago, which was pretty much just another way of saying the same thing. If this really is fifteen or twenty years ago, Rackman thought, then Jenny would be living in Sacramento and I'd be across the bay in El Cerrito and still married to Helene. But what the hell kind of thing was that to be thinking, *If this really is fifteen or twenty years ago*?

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He considered taking himself to the nearest emergency room and telling them he was having a breakdown, but he knew that once he put himself in the hands of the medics, there'd be no extricating himself: they'd subject him to a million tests, reports would be filed with this agency and that, his driver's license might be yanked, bad things would happen to his credit rating. It would be much smarter, he thought, to check himself into a hotel room, take a shower, rest, try to figure all this out, wait for things to get back to normal.

Rackman headed for the Hilton, a couple of blocks away. Though night had fallen just a little while ago, the sun was high overhead now, and the weather had changed again, too: it was sharp and cool, autumn just shading into winter. He was getting a different season and a different time of day every fifteen minutes or so, it seemed. The Hilton desk clerk, tall and balding and starchy-looking, had such a self-important manner that as Rackman requested a room he felt a little abashed at not having any luggage with him, but the clerk didn't appear to give a damn about that, simply handed him the registration form and asked him for his credit card. Rackman put his Visa down on the counter and began to fill out the form.

"Sir?" the desk clerk said, after a moment.

Rackman looked up. The clerk was staring at his credit card. It was the translucent kind, and he tipped it this way and that, puzzledly holding it against the light. "Problem?" Rackman asked, and the clerk muttered something about how unusual the card looked.

Then his expression darkened. "Wait just a second," he said, very coldly now, and tapped the imprinted expiration date on the card. "What is *this* supposed to be? Expires July, 2010? *2010*, sir? *2010*? Are we having a little joke, sir?" He flipped the card across the counter at Rackman the way he might have done if it had been covered with some noxious substance.

Another surge of terror hit him. He backed away, moving quickly through the lobby and into the street. Of course he might have tried to pay cash, he supposed, but the room would surely be something like $225 a night, and he had only about $350 on him. If his credit card was useless, he'd need to hang on to his cash at least until he understood what was happening to him. Instead of the Hilton, he would go to some cheaper place, perhaps one of the motels up on Lombard Street.

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On his way back to his car Rackman glanced at a newspaper in a sidewalk rack. President Reagan was on the front page, under a headline about the invasion of Grenada. The date on the paper was Wednesday, October 26, 1983. Sure, he thought. 1983. This hallucination isn't missing a trick. I am in 1983 and Reagan is President again, with 1979 just up the road, 1965, 1957, 1950 —

In 1950 Rackman hadn't even been born yet. He wondered what was going to happen to him when he got back to a time earlier than his own birth.

He stopped at the first motel on Lombard that had a VACANCY sign and registered for a room. The price was only $75, but when he put two fifties down on the counter, the clerk, a pleasant, smiling Latino woman, gave him a pleasant smile and tapped her finger against the swirls of pink coloration next to President Grant's portrait. "Somebody has stuck you with some very funny bills, sir. But you know that I can't take them. If you can pay by credit card, though, Visa, American Express — "

Of course she couldn't take them. Rackman remembered, now, that all the paper money had changed five or ten years back, new designs, bigger portraits, distinctive patches of pink or blue ink on their front sides that had once been boringly monochromatic. And these bills of his had the tiny date "2004" in the corner.

So far as the world of 1983 was concerned, the money he was carrying was nothing but play money.

1983.

Jenny, who is up in Sacramento in 1983 and has no idea yet that he even exists, had been twenty-five that year. Already he was more than twice her age. And she would get younger and younger as he went ever onward, if that was what was going to continue to happen.

Maybe it wouldn't. Soon, perhaps, the pendulum would begin to swing the other way, carrying him back to his own time, to his own life. What if it didn't, though? What if it just kept on going?

In that case, Rackman thought, Jenny was lost to him, with everything that had bound them together now unhappened. Rackman reached out suddenly, grasping the air as though reaching for Jenny, but all he grasped was air. There was no Jenny for him any longer. He had lost her, yes. And he would lose everything else of what he had thought of as his

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life as well, his whole past peeling away strip by strip. He had no reason to think that the pendulum *would* swing back. Already the exact details of Jenny's features were blurring in his mind. He struggled to recall them: the quizzical blue eyes, the slender nose, the wide, generous mouth, the slim, supple body. She seemed to be drifting past him in the fog, caught in an inexorable current carrying her ever farther away.

He slept in his car that night, up by the Marina, where he hoped no one would bother him. No one did. Morning light awakened him after a few hours — his wristwatch said it was 9:45 P.M. on the same August day when all this had started, but he knew better now than to regard what his watch told him as having any meaning — and when he stepped outside the day was dry and clear, with a blue summer sky overhead and the sort of harsh wind blowing that only San Francisco can manage on a summer day. He was getting used to the ever-changing weather by now, though, the swift parade of seasons tumbling upon him one after another. Each new one would hold him for a little while in that odd *enclosed* way, but then it would release its grasp and nudge him onward into the next one.

He checked the newspaper box on the corner. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Tuesday, May 1, 1973. Big front-page story: Nixon dismisses White House counsel John Dean and accepts the resignations of aides John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman. Right, he thought. Dean, Ehrlichman, Haldeman: Watergate. So a whole decade had vanished while he slept. He had slipped all the way back to 1973. He wasn't even surprised. He had entered some realm beyond all possibility of surprise.

Taking out his wallet, Rackman checked his driver's license. Still the same, expires 03-11-11, photo of his familiar fifty-something face. His car was still a silver 2009 Prius. Certain things hadn't changed. But the Prius stood out like a shriek among the other parked cars, every last one of them some clunky-looking old model of the kind that he dimly remembered from his youth. What we have here is 1973, he thought. Probably not for long, though.

He hadn't had anything to eat since lunchtime, ten hours and thirty-five years ago. He drove over to Chestnut Street, marveling at the quiet old-fashioned look of all the shopfronts, and parked right outside Joe's, which he knew had been out of business since maybe the Clinton years.

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There were no parking meters on the street. Rackman ordered a salad, a Joe's Special, and a glass of red wine, and paid for it with a ten-dollar bill of the old green-and-white kind that he happened to have. Meal plus wine, $8.50, he thought. That sounded about right for this long ago. It was a very consistent kind of hallucination. He left a dollar tip.

Rackman remembered pretty well what he had been doing in the spring of 1973. He was twenty-two that year, out of college almost a year, working in Cody's Books on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley while waiting to get into law school, for which he had been turned down the first time around but which he had high hopes of entering that autumn. He and Al Mortenson, another young Cody's clerk — nice steady guy, easy to get along with — were rooming together in a little upstairs apartment on Dana, two or three blocks from the bookshop.

Whatever had happened to old Al? Rackman had lost touch with him many years back. A powerful urge seized him now to drive across to Berkeley and look for him. He hadn't spoken with anyone except those two hotel clerks since he had left the car lot, what felt like a million years ago, and a terrible icy loneliness was beginning to settle over him as he went spinning onward through his constantly unraveling world. He needed to reach out to someone, anyone, for whatever help he could find. Al might be a good man to consult. Al was levelheaded; Al was unflusterable; Al was *steady*. What about driving over to Berkeley now and looking for Al at the Dana Street place? — "I know you don't recognize me, Al, but I'm actually Phil Rackman, only I'm from 2008, and I'm having some sort of bad trip and I need to sit down in a quiet place with a good friend like you and figure out what's going on." Rackman wondered what that would accomplish. Probably nothing, but at least it might provide him with half an hour of companionship, sympathy, even understanding. At worst Al would think he was a lunatic and he would wind up under sedation at Alta Bates Hospital while they tried to find his next of kin. If he really was sliding constantly backward in time he would slip away from Alta Bates too, Rackman thought, and if not, if he was simply unhinged, maybe a hospital was where he belonged.

He went to Berkeley. The season drifted back from spring to late winter while he was crossing the bridge: in Berkeley the acacias were in bloom, great clusters of golden yellow flowers, and that was a January

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thing. The sight of Berkeley in early 1973, a year that had in fact been the last gasp of the Sixties, gave him a shiver: the Day-Glo rock-concert posters on all the walls, the flower-child costumes, the huge, bizarre helmets of shaggy hair that everyone was wearing. The streets were strangely clean, hardly any litter, no graffiti. It all was like a movie set, a careful, loving reconstruction of the era. He had no business being here. He was entirely out of place. And yet he had lived here once. This street belonged to his own past. He had lost Jenny, he had lost his nice condominium, he had lost his car dealership, but other things that he had thought were lost, like this Day-Glo tie-dyed world of his youth, were coming back to him. Only they weren't coming back for long, he knew. One by one they would present themselves, tantalizing flashes of a returning past, and then they'd go streaming onward, lost to him like everything else, lost for a second and terribly final time.

He guessed from the position of the pale winter sun, just coming up over the hills to the east, that the time was eight or nine in the morning. If so, Al would probably still be at home. The Dana Street place looked just as Rackman remembered it, a tidy little frame building, the landlady's tiny but immaculate garden of pretty succulents out front, the redwood deck, the staircase on the side that led to the upstairs apartment. As he started upward an unsettling burst of panic swept through him at the possibility that he might come face to face with his own younger self. But in a moment his trepidation passed. It wouldn't happen, he told himself. It was just *too* impossible. There had to be a limit to this thing somewhere.

A kid answered his knock, sleepy-looking and impossibly young, a tall lanky guy in jeans and a T-shirt, with a long oval face almost completely engulfed in an immense spherical mass of jet-black hair that covered his forehead and his cheeks and his chin, a wild woolly tangle that left only eyes and nose and lips visible. A golden peace-symbol amulet dangled on a silver chain around his neck. My God, Rackman thought, this really is the Al I knew in 1973. Like a ghost out of time. But *I* am the ghost. *I* am the ghost.

"Yes?" the kid at the door said vaguely.

"Al Mortenson, right?"

"Yes." He said it in an uneasy way, chilly, distant, grudging.

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What the hell, some unknown elderly guy at the door, an utter stranger wanting God only knew what, eight or nine in the morning: even the unflappable Al might be a little suspicious. Rackman saw no option but to launch straight into his story. "I realize this is going to sound very strange to you. But I ask you to bear with me. — Do I look in any way familiar to you, Al?"

He wouldn't, naturally. He was much stockier than the Phil Rackman of 1973, his full-face beard was ancient history and his once-luxurious russet hair was close-cropped and gray, and he was wearing a checked suit of the kind that nobody, not even a middle-aged man, would have worn in 1973. But he began to speak, quietly, earnestly, intensely, persuasively, his best one-foot-in-the-door salesman approach, the approach he might have used if he had been trying to sell his biggest model SUV to a frail old lady from the Rossmoor retirement home. Starting off by casually mentioning Al's roommate Phil Rackman — "he isn't here, by any chance, is he?" — no, he wasn't, thank God — and then asking Al once again to prepare himself for a very peculiar tale indeed, giving him no chance to reply, and swiftly and smoothly working around to the notion that he himself was Phil Rackman, not Phil's father but the actual Phil Rackman who been his roommate back in 1973, only in fact he was the Phil Rackman of the year 2008 who had without warning become caught up in what could only be described as an inexplicable toboggan-slide backward across time.

Even through that forest of facial hair Al's reactions were readily discernible: puzzlement at first, then annoyance verging on anger, then a show of curiosity, a flicker of interest at the possibility of such a wild thing — hey, man, far out! Cool! — and then, gradually, gradually, gradually bringing himself to the tipping point, completing the transition from skepticism verging on hostility to mild curiosity to fascination to stunned acceptance, as Rackman began to conjure up remembered episodes of their shared life that only he could have known. That time in the summer of '72 when he and Al and their current girlfriends had gone camping in the Sierras and had been happily screwing away on a flat smooth granite outcropping next to a mountain stream in what they thought was total seclusion, 8000 feet above sea level, when a wide-eyed party of Boy Scouts came marching past them down the trail; and that long-legged girl from

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Oregon Rackman had picked up one weekend who turned out to be double-jointed, or whatever, and showed them both the most amazing sexual tricks; and the great moment when they and some friends had scored half a pound of hash and gave a party that lasted three days running without time out for sleep; and the time when he and Al had hitchhiked down to Big Sur, he with big, cuddly Ginny Beardsley and Al with hot little Nikki Rosenzweig, during Easter break, and the four of them had dropped a little acid and gone absolutely gonzo berserk together in a secluded redwood grove —

"No," Al said. "That hasn't happened yet. Easter is still three months away. And I don't know any Nikki Rosenzweig."

Rackman rolled his eyes lasciviously. "You will, kiddo. Believe me, you will! Ginny will introduce you, and — and — "

"So you even know my own future."

"For me it isn't the future," Rackman said. "It's the long-ago past. When you and I were rooming together right here on Dana Street and having the time of our lives."

"But how is this possible?"

"You think I know, old pal? All I know is that it's happening. I'm me, really me, sliding backward in time. It's the truth. Look at my face, Al. Run a computer simulation in your mind, if you can — hell, people don't have their own computers yet, do they? — well, just try to age me up, in your imagination, gray hair, more weight, but the same nose, Al, the same mouth — " He shook his head. "Wait a second. Look at this." He drew out his driver's license and thrust it at the other man. "You see the name? The photo? You see the birthdate? *You see the expiration date*? March 2011? Here, look at these fifty-dollar bills! The dates on them. This credit card, this Visa. Do you even know what a Visa is? Did we have them back in 1973?"

"Christ," Al said, in a husky, barely audible whisper. "Jesus Christ, Phil. — It's okay if I call you Phil, right?"

"Phil, yes."

"Look, Phil — " That same thin ghostly whisper, the voice of a man in shock. Rackman had never, in the old days, seen Al this badly shaken up. "The bookstore's about to open. I've got to get to work. You come in, wait here, make yourself at home." Then a little manic laugh: "You *are*

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at home, aren't you? In a manner of speaking. So wait here. Rest. Relax. Smoke some of my dope, if you want. You probably know where I keep it. Meet me at Cody's at one, and we can go out to lunch and talk about all this, okay? I want to know all about it. What year did you say you came from? 2011?"

"2008."

"2008. Christ, this is so wild! — You'll stay here, then?"

"And if my younger self walks in on me?"

"Don't worry. You're safe. He's in Los Angeles this week."

"Groovy," Rackman said, wondering if anyone still said things like that. "Go on, then. Go to work. I'll see you later."

THE TWO ROOMS, Al's and his own just across the hall, were like museum exhibits: the posters for Fillmore West concerts, the antique stereo set and the stack of LP records, the tie-dyed shirts and bell-bottom pants scattered in the corner, the bong on the dresser, the macramé wall hangings, the musty aroma of last night's incense. Rackman poked around, lost in dreamy nostalgia and at times close to tears as he looked at this artifact of that ancient era and that one, *The Teachings of Don Juan, The White Album, The Whole Earth Catalog.* His own copies. He still had the Castaneda book somewhere; he remembered the beer stain on the cover. He peered into the dresser drawer where Al kept his stash, scooped up a pinch of it in his fingers and sniffed it, smiled, put it back. It was years since he had smoked. Decades.

He ran his hand over his cheek. His stubble was starting to bother him. He hadn't shaved since yesterday morning on Rackman body time. He knew there'd be a shaver in the bathroom, though — he didn't like beards, had never worn one even in the Seventies — and, yes, there was his old Norelco three-headed job. He felt better with clean cheeks. Rackman stuffed the shaver into his inside jacket pocket, knowing he'd want it in the days ahead.

Then he found himself wondering whether he had parked in a tow-away zone. They had always been very tough about illegally parked cars in Berkeley. You could try to assassinate the president and get off with a six-month sentence, but God help you if you parked in a tow-away zone.

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And if they took his car away, he'd be in an even worse pickle than he already was. The car was his one link to the world he had left behind, his time capsule, his home, now, actually.

The car was still where he had left it. But he was afraid to leave it for long. It might slip away from him in the next time-shift. He got in, thinking to wait in it until it was time to meet Al for lunch. But although it was still just midmorning he felt drowsiness overcoming him, and almost instantly he dozed off. When he awakened he saw that it was dark outside. He must have slept the day away. The dashboard clock told him it was 1:15 P.M., but that was useless, meaningless. Probably it was early evening, too late for lunch with Al. Maybe they could have dinner instead.

On the way over to the bookstore, marveling every step of the way at the utter weirdness of everybody he passed in the streets, the strange beards, the flamboyant globes of hair, the gaudy clothing. Rackman began to see that it would be very embarrassing to tell Al that he had grown up to own a suburban automobile dealership. He had planned to become a legal advocate for important social causes, or perhaps a public defender, or an investigator of corporate malfeasance. Everybody had noble plans like that, back then. Going into the car business hadn't been on anyone's screen.

Then he saw that he didn't have to tell Al anything about what he had come to do for a living. It was a long story and not one that Al was likely to find interesting. Al wouldn't care that he had become a car dealer. Al was sufficiently blown away by the mere fact that his former roommate Phil Rackman had dropped in on him out of the future that morning.

He entered the bookstore and spotted Al over near the cash register. But when he waved he got only a blank stare in return.

"I'm sorry I missed our lunch date, Al. I guess I just nodded off. It's been a pretty tiring day for me, you know."

There was no trace of recognition on Al's face.

"Sir? There must be some mistake."

"Al Mortenson? Who lives on Dana Street?"

"I'm Al Mortenson, yes. I live in Bowles Hall, though."

Bowles Hall was a campus dormitory. Undergraduates lived there. This Al hadn't graduated yet.

This Al's hair was different too, Rackman saw now. A tighter cut,

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more disciplined, more forehead showing. And his beard was much longer, cascading down over his chest, hiding the peace symbol. He might have had a haircut during the day but he couldn't have grown four inches more of beard.

There was a stack of newspapers on the counter next to the register, the *New York Times*. Rackman flicked a glance at the top one. *November 10, 1971.*

I haven't just slept away the afternoon, Rackman thought. I've slept away all of 1972. He and Al hadn't rented the Dana Street place until after graduation, in June of '72.

Fumbling, trying to recover, always the nice helpful guy, Al said, "You aren't Mr. Chesley, are you? Bud Chesley's father?"

Bud Chesley had been a classmate of theirs, a jock, big, broad-shouldered. The main thing that Rackman remembered about him was that he had been one of about six men on campus who were in favor of the war in Vietnam. Rackman seemed to recall that in his senior year Al had roomed with Chesley in Bowles, before he and Al had known each other. "No," Rackman said leadenly. "I'm not Mr. Chesley. I'm really sorry to have bothered you."

So it was hopeless, then. He had suspected it all along, but now, feeling the past tugging at him as he hurried back to his car, it was certain. The slippage made any sort of human interaction lasting more than half an hour or so impossible to sustain. He struggled with it, trying to tug back, to hold fast against the sliding, hoping that perhaps he could root himself somehow in the present and then begin the climb forward again until he reached the place where he belonged. But he could feel the slippage continuing, not at any consistent rate but in sudden unpredictable bursts, and there was nothing he could do about it. There were times when he was completely unaware of it until it had happened and other times when he could see the seasons rocketing right by in front of his eyes.

Without any particular destination in mind Rackman returned to his car, wandered around Berkeley until he found himself heading down Ashby Avenue to the freeway, and drove back into San Francisco. The toll was only a quarter. Astonishing. The cars around him on the bridge all seemed like collector's items, with yellow-and-black license plates, three

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digits, three letters. He wondered what a highway patrolman would say about his own plates, if he recognized them as California plates at all.

Halfway across the bridge Rackman turned the radio on, hoping the car might be able to pick up a news broadcast out of 2008, but no, no, when he got KCBS he heard the announcer talking about President Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk, Vietnam, Israel refusing to give back Jerusalem after the recent war with the Arab countries, Dr. Martin Luther King calling for calm following a night of racial strife in Hartford, Connecticut. It was hard to remember some of the history exactly, but Rackman knew that Dr. King had been assassinated in 1968, so he figured that just in the course of crossing the bridge he probably had slid back into 1967 or even 1966. He had been in high school then. All the sweaty anguish of that whole lunatic era came swimming back into his mind, the Robert Kennedy assassination too, the body counts on the nightly news, Malcolm X, peace marches, the strident 1968 political convention in Chicago, the race riots, Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, Mao Tse-tung, spacemen in orbit around the moon, Lady Bird Johnson, Cassius Clay. *Hey hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today*? The noise, the hard-edged excitement, the daily anxiety. It felt like the Pleistocene to him now. But he had driven right into the thick of it.

THE SLIPPAGE CONTINUED. The long hair went away, the granny glasses, the Day-Glo posters, the tie-dyed clothes. John F. Kennedy came and went in reverse. Night and day seemed to follow one another in random sequence. Rackman ate his meals randomly too, no idea whether it was breakfast or lunch or dinner that he needed. He had lost all track of personal time. He caught naps in his car, kept a low profile, said very little to anyone. A careless restaurant cashier took one of his gussied-up fifties without demur and gave him a stack of spendable bills in change. He doled those bills out parsimoniously, watching what he spent even though meals, like the bridge toll, like the cost of a newspaper, like everything else back here, were astoundingly cheap, a nickel or a dime for this, fifty cents for that.

San Francisco was smaller, dingier, a little old 1950s-style town, no trace of the highrise buildings now. Everything was muted, old-fashioned,

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the simpler, more innocent textures of his childhood. He half expected it all to be in black and white, as an old newsreel would be, and perhaps to flicker a little. But he took in smells, breezes, sounds, that no newsreel could have captured. This wasn't any newsreel and it wasn't any hallucination, either. This was the world itself, dense, deep, real. All too real, unthinkably real. And there was no place for him in it.

Men wore hats, women's coats had padded shoulders. Shop windows sparkled. There was a Christmas bustle in the streets. A little while later, though, the sky brightened and the dry, cold winds of San Francisco summer came whistling eastward at him again out of the Pacific, and then, presto jingo, the previous winter's rainy season was upon him. He wondered which year's winter it was.

It was 1953, the newspaper told him. The corner newspaper rack was his only friend. It provided him with guidance, information about his present position in time. That was Eisenhower on the front page. The Korean war was still going on, here in 1953. And Stalin: Stalin had just died. Rackman remembered Eisenhower, the president of his childhood, kindly old Ike. Truman's bespectacled face would be next. Rackman had been born during Truman's second term. He had no recollection of the Truman presidency but he could recall the salty old Harry of later years, who went walking every day, gabbing with reporters about anything that came into his head.

What is going to happen to me, Rackman wondered, when I get back past my own birthdate?

Maybe he would come to some glittering gateway, a giant sizzling special effect throwing off fireworks across the whole horizon, with a blue-white sheen of nothingness stretching into infinity beyond it. And when he passed through it he would disappear into oblivion and that would be that. He'd find out soon enough. He couldn't be much more than a year or two away from the day of his birth.

Without knowing or caring where he was going, Rackman began to drive south out of San Francisco, the poky little San Francisco of this far-off day, heading out of town on what once had been Highway 101, the freeway that led to the airport and San Jose and, eventually, Los Angeles. It wasn't a freeway now, just an oddly charming little four-lane road. The billboards that lined it on both sides looked like ads from old *National*

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Geographics. The curving rows of small ticky-tacky houses on the hillsides hadn't been built yet. There was almost nothing except open fields everywhere, down here south of the city. The ballpark wasn't there — the Giants still played in New York in this era, he recalled — and when he went past the airport, he almost failed to notice it, it was such a piffling little small-town place. Only when a DC-3 passed overhead like a huge droning mosquito did he realize that that collection of tin sheds over to the left was what would one day be SFO.

Rackman knew that he was still slipping and slipping as he went, that the pace of slippage seemed to be picking up, that if that glittering gateway existed he had already gone beyond it. He was somewhere near 1945 now or maybe even earlier — they were honking at his car on the road in amazement, as though it was a spaceship that had dropped down from Mars — and now a clear, cold understanding of what was in store for him was growing in his mind.

He wouldn't disappear through any gateway. It didn't matter that he hadn't been born yet in the year he was currently traveling through, because he wasn't growing any younger as he drifted backward. And the deep past waited for him. He saw that he would just go endlessly onward, cut loose from the restraints that time imposed, drifting on and on back into antiquity. While he was driving southward, heading for San Jose or Los Angeles or wherever it was that he might be going next, the years would roll along backward, the twentieth century would be gobbled up in the nineteenth, California's great cities would melt away — he had already seen that happening in San Francisco — and the whole state would revert to the days of Mexican rule, a bunch of little villages clustered around the Catholic missions, and then the villages and the missions would disappear too. A day or two later for him, California would be an emptiness, nobody here but simple Indian tribes. Farther to the east, in the center of the continent, great herds of bison would roam. Still farther east would be the territory of the Thirteen Colonies, gradually shriveling back into tiny pioneering settlements and then vanishing also. Well, he thought, if he could get himself across the country quickly enough, he might be able to reach New York City — Nieuw Amsterdam, it would probably be by then — while it still existed. There he might be able to arrange a voyage across to Europe before the continent reverted entirely to its pre-Columbian

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status. But what then? All that he could envisage was a perpetual journey backward, backward, ever backward: the Renaissance, the Dark Ages, Rome, Greece, Babylon, Egypt, the Ice Age. A couple of summers ago he and Jenny had taken a holiday in France, down in the Dordogne, where they had looked at the painted caves of the Cro-Magnon men, the colorful images of bulls and bison and spotted horses and mammoths. No one knew what those pictures meant, why they had been painted. Now he would go back and find out at first hand the answer to the enigmas of the prehistoric caves. How very cool that sounded, how interesting, a nice fantasy, except that if you gave it half a second's thought it was appalling. To whom would he impart that knowledge? What good would it do him, or anyone?

The deep past was waiting for him, yes. But would he get there? Even a Prius wasn't going to make it all the way across North America on a single tank of gas, and soon there weren't going to be any gas stations, and even if there were he would have no valid money to pay for gas, or food, or anything else. Pretty soon there would be no roads, either. He couldn't *walk* to New York. In that wilderness he wouldn't last three days.

He had kept himself in motion up until this moment, staying just ahead of the vast gray grimness that was threatening to invade his soul, but it was catching up with him now. Rackman went through ten or fifteen minutes that might have been the darkest, bleakest moments of his life. Then — was it something about the sweet simplicity of this little road, no longer the roaring Highway 101 but now just a dusty, narrow two-laner with hardly any traffic? — there came an unexpected change in his mood. He grew indifferent to his fate. In an odd way he found himself actually welcoming whatever might come. The prospect before him looked pretty terrifying, yes. But it might just be exciting, too. He had liked his life, he had liked it very much, but it had been torn away from him, he knew not how or why. This was his life now. He had no choice about that. The best thing to do, Rackman thought, was to take it one century at a time and try to enjoy the ride.

What he needed right now was a little breather: come to a halt if only for a short while, pause and regroup. Stop and pass the time, so to speak, as he got himself ready for the next phase of his new existence. He pulled

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over by the side of the road and turned off the ignition and sat there quietly, thinking about nothing at all.

After a while a youngish man on a motorcycle pulled up alongside him. The motorcycle was hardly more than a souped-up bike. The man was wearing a khaki blouse and khaki trousers, all pleats and flounces, a very old-fashioned outfit, something like a scoutmaster's uniform. He himself had an old-fashioned look, too, dark hair parted in the middle like an actor in a silent movie.

Then Rackman noticed the California Highway Patrol badge on the man's shoulder. He opened the car window. The patrolman leaned toward him and gave him an earnest smile, a Boy Scout smile. Even the smile was old-fashioned. You couldn't help believing the sincerity of it. "Is there any difficulty, sir? May I be of any assistance?"

So polite, so formal. *Sir*. Everyone had been calling him *sir* since this trip had started, the desk clerks, the people in restaurants, Al Mortenson, and now this CHP man. So respectful, everybody was, back here in prehistory.

"No," Rackman said. "No problem. Everything's fine."

The patrolman didn't seem to hear him. He had turned his complete attention to Rackman's car itself, the glossy silver Prius, the car out of the future. The look of it was apparently sinking in for the first time. He was staring at the car in disbelief, in befuddlement, in unconcealed jaw-sagging awe, gawking at its fluid streamlined shape, at its gleaming futuristic dashboard. Then he turned back to Rackman himself, taking in the look of his clothing, his haircut, his checked jacket, his patterned shirt. The man's eyes seemed to glaze. Rackman knew that there had to be something about his whole appearance that seemed as wrong to the patrolman as the patrolman's did to him. He could see the man working to get himself under control. The car must have him completely flummoxed, Rackman thought. The patrolman began to say something but it was a moment before he could put his voice in gear. Then he said, hoarsely, like a rusty automaton determined to go through its routine no matter what, "I want you to know, sir, that if you are having any problem with your — ah — your car, we are here to assist you in whatever way we can."

To assist you. That was a good one.

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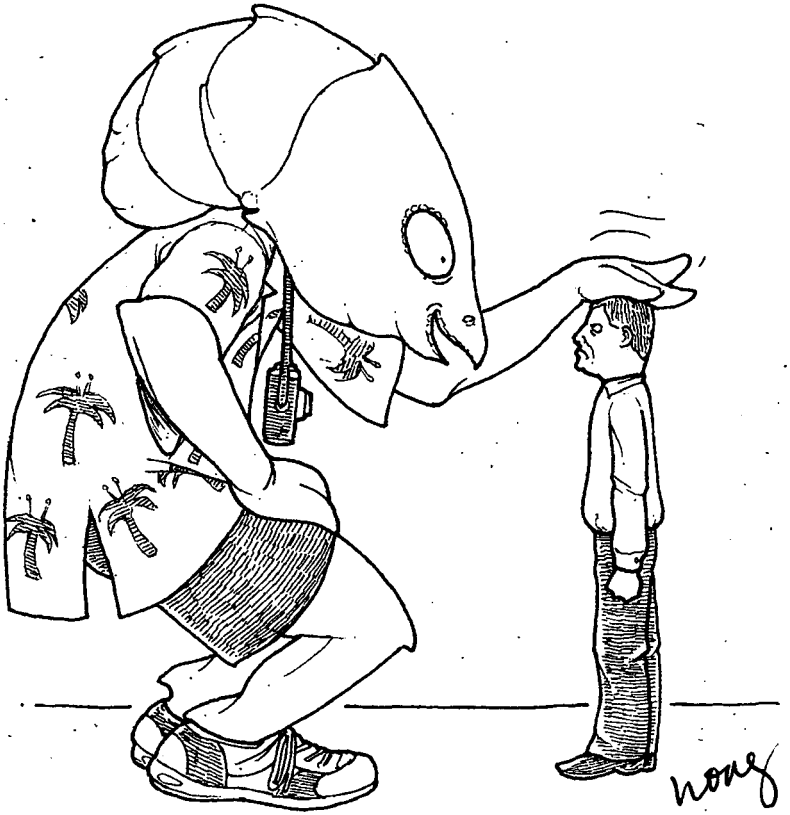
Rackman managed a faint smile. "Thanks, but the car's okay," he said. "And I'm okay too. I just stopped off here to rest a bit, that's all. I've got a long trip ahead of me." He reached for the ignition key. Silently, smoothly, the Prius floated forward into the morning light and the night that would quickly follow it and into the random succession of springs and winters and autumns and summers beyond, forward into the mysteries, dark and dreadful and splendid, that lay before him. ☙



"What an intelligent little species! Yes it is! Wudda-wudda..."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Midnight Road, by Tom Piccirilli, Bantam Books, 2007, $6.99.

YOU'D think that dying was the worst thing that could happen to you. For Child Protection Services investigator Flynn, that's only the start of his misery.

It begins with an investigation out in the boonies during a big winter storm. As he rescues a young girl and her mentally challenged brother from a large and wealthy estate, he's almost killed by the children's mother. They make their escape, but the mother follows in her car and runs him off the road into a lake. The children get out before the car plunges into the frigid water, but Flynn's not so lucky.

He's twenty-eight minutes in the water, flash frozen, before he's resuscitated. According to the press, he's the Miracle Man, but everything's the same as it was before except that now his life starts to spiral completely out of his control. Someone wants to kill him. The authorities are trying to pin a number of murders on him. Oh, and he's being haunted by the ghost of a dead bulldog named Zero who talks to him in his own voice.

Piccirilli obviously shares my own love for noir. This is a hard-boiled mystery, and while it bucks the tradition in any number of good ways, the meat is here: the darkness at the heart of the story, the main character's weary worldview, and the tragic circumstances of his personal history that make him the man he is.

To spice it up, Piccirilli throws in a handful of ghosts, though I will admit that the reality of their presence relies on how the reader comes to the book. If you lean toward fantasy, you'll take them at face value. If your reading runs more to the mainstream, it's possible that these ghosts are only figments of Flynn's imagination.

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Piccirilli never comes down with a definite take on what they are, but I didn't mind. I like the uneasy ambiguity — the fact that, though we're rooting for Flynn, he could well be more damaged than he cares to admit. He certainly makes more wrong choices than would someone in full control of his senses.

On the other hand, how many people have died and come back? Who knows what that would do to you?

But no matter what you decide as you read, what can't be denied is that over the years Piccirilli has developed into a powerful voice. He writes with strong, lean prose. He understands the impact that our pasts have upon our present selves. And he cares deeply for his characters, which in turn makes us care for them, too.

This is as good as — no, better than — any number of the big name hardcovers that make the bestseller lists. Do yourself a favor and find out why.

The Servants, by Michael Marshall Smith, Earthling Publications, 2007, $30.

I think of Michael Marshall Smith as the quintessential sf writer (yes, I know he writes thrillers as Michael Marshall, but I'm slow and haven't caught up with those books yet), so I was surprised to find him penning this quiet, tender, and deeply personal story of an eleven-year-old boy's coming of age in a decidedly mainstream setting.

Let me quickly note that when I say "deeply personal," I'm referring to how the story relates to the characters. I have no idea how, or even if, this fits into Smith's own history.

And I also feel I need to add that this is an adult book about an eleven-year-old, not a book aimed at that general age group.

It's winter in Brighton, England, a place where Mark and his parents used to holiday. His mother would shop in the little stores, they'd wander along the boardwalk, they'd have Chinese take-out...all in all, a pleasant break from their lives in London.

Now Mark and his mother have moved to Brighton, along with her new husband, David. Mark resents his stepfather. His mother seems to be sick a lot and David doesn't appear to be doing anything to help except — so far as Mark is concerned — do everything wrong.

Mark takes refuge in trying to master jumps on his skateboard.

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It's lonely out on the cold beachfront, and he's bruised from head to toe from his falls off the board, but it still seems better than spending any time in the miserable house to which David has brought them, and where Mark's mother seems to get sicker each day.

Then Mark meets the old lady who lives in the basement apartment of the house and he discovers that the past isn't quite so distant as one might assume.

Smith has done a terrific job with this book, perfectly capturing the confused and sometimes belligerent mindset of his young protagonist while still keeping him likable. It helps that the reader clues in long before Mark about what's happening to his mother — it allows us to feel more sympathy for him — but that doesn't make it any happier a situation.

I've been to Brighton in the off-season and Smith has also done a fine job of bringing the cold and damp setting to life — and he always shows it through the eleven-year-old Mark's eyes, which keeps the character (and therefore, the readers) grounded in the story when the fantastical elements begin to be revealed.

They were one of my favorite parts of the book. I've read a lot of fiction dealing with the supernatural, or with fantastical elements, and while I appreciate the curiosity and inventiveness that writers can bring to them, what I'm most interested in, in a story such as this, is how an encounter with them affect and change ordinary people. When the world shifts underfoot, we can't see it the same way anymore, no matter how much we might want to, and Smith does a perfect job of utilizing this to tell Mark's story.

The Servants is an absolute delight of a book — not because it's so cheerful. With its subject matter, that would be a real trick to pull off. No, the delight is in how beautifully Smith handles every aspect of this poignant and mysterious story.

Highly recommended.

God Save the Queen, by Mike Carey & John Bolton, Vertigo/DC, 2007, $19.99.

Usually when practitioners in the comic medium take a stab at the fantasy field, they gravitate to Howardesque barbarians, or very simplified takes on Tolkienesque epic fantasy (with lots of swordplay and magic being cast around). While there's nothing particularly wrong with that, it's still refreshing to

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find a graphic novel that takes its cue from something a bit more contemporary. But while *God Save the Queen* certainly owes a tip of the hat to the edgy takes on fairy by prose authors such as Holly Black, in the end, it delivers its own variation, with a fresh voice.

Linda is one of those surly, rebelling-for-the-sake-of-rebelling characters that you just want to shake some sense into (though, of course, we never would in our current PC landscape). She treats everyone around her with a cavalier disregard for their well-being — both emotional and physical. So it's no surprise that she ends up leaving a London dance club with an amoral group of partiers who just happen to be fairies.

I'm not going to tell you why they befriend her, but when she learns what they are, she also learns that she's half fairy herself and caught smack dab in the middle of a power struggle in the fairy court. The book's title doesn't refer to the Queen of England, but rather to the queen of that court — a rather miserable excuse for a sentient being.

(I've noticed these days that fairy queens seem to have taken the place of wicked stepparents as this sort of story is updated for a contemporary audience. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's a backlash against the young and the beautiful who reign from the covers of the weekly glossy "news" magazines and supermarket tabloids. But I digress....)

The title also wakes — for those old enough to remember — a resonance with the punk movement — though it calls up the hedonistic end of it as championed by the Sex Pistols, rather than the more socially and politically aware side which took its anthems from groups like the Clash.

Mike Carey (you might know him from his run on *Hellblazer*, or his current work on the terrific series *Crossing Midnight*) has turned in a powerful story. His fairies are the kind that explain why country folk used to do everything they could to avoid their attention — they're capricious, dark, self-centered, and dangerous beings. His characters aren't what you find in most fantasy books, either. But while not always likable, and often driven by baser designs than one might expect from heroes, they're still fascinating.

Do they come through in the end and do the right thing? I'll let you find out for yourselves.

John Bolton's a wonderful artist. What he lacks in storytelling flow (the almost cinematic movement

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from panel to panel in which some artists excel), he more than makes up for in the veracity and painterly merit of his individual panels. He's equally at ease depicting beautiful characters and the grotesque — which is lucky, since Carey gives him a good workout with both.

Ironside, by Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2007, $16.99.

And speaking of Holly Black, in her new novel she returns to the characters of *Tithe* and (to a lesser degree) *Valiant*.

I'm not going to lie to you. Yes, you can read this book on its own and it will be a highly enjoyable experience. But familiarity with the other two books, in particular *Tithe*, will definitely make it a richer experience.

Ironside. It's what faerie call New York City and the vast sprawl of cityscape that surrounds it. And it's where Kaye lives — the pixie we met in *Tithe* who was switched at birth with a human girl and grew up thinking she was human until encounters with the courts of faerie showed her the truth.

Like Linda in *God Save the Queen*, Kaye has a bit of a mouth on her, but the difference is, she cares about her friends and family. She may make a terrible mess of their lives, but it's not because she wants to. It's only because when she tries to do the right thing, she often doesn't have all the necessary information at hand to make a sensible decision, and so makes things worse.

Ironside involves more warring courts of faerie — something that, even in a contemporary setting, is starting to get old these days — but I'll forgive Black for that this one last time because she has a vigorous writing style, great dialogue, and a cast of genuinely likable characters that you can't abandon once you've started reading a book of hers.

And for those of you who have followed these characters through the earlier pair of books, there's a satisfying sense of closure for those who survive the troubles that arise for them in the course of this story.

Neptune Noir, edited by Rob Thomas, Benbella, 2007, $17.95.

This is my long column of the year, so I think there's space for something from a little further afield. It has nothing to do with our genre except for the fact that many of the readers of SF and fantasy are drawn to the television series discussed in the essays collected here.

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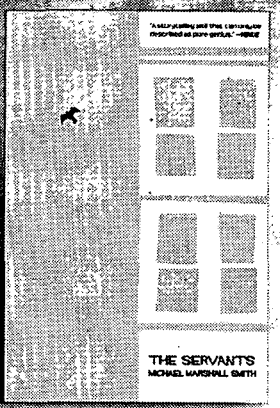

Things are unreliable. Things break. Things fall apart. Even at 11 years old, Mark knows this all too well.

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But I will be brief.

If you've been Jonesing for something to replace your *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fixation, then you should be tuning in to *Veronica Mars* on Tuesday nights. No, there aren't any vampires or demons, and Mars isn't the Chosen One to fight them, but it's smartly written, with great dialogue, a likable cast, and season arcs that give a satisfying closure (with just a little tease to get you back the next year). The third season's just ending as I write this, but the first two are readily available on DVD.

Don't be put off by the idea of a high school student moonlighting as a private eye. Remember, you bought into a high school student fighting vampires, and like *Buffy*, this show is so much more than what it appears to be from a quick glance. And while I highly doubt it was deliberately done, I see parallels between the two shows' characters:

Wallace is Xander, Mac is Willow, Weevil is Spike, Veronica's dad is Giles, Logan is Angel. And Veronica is Buffy, of course.

But while this show wouldn't exist if *Buffy* hadn't come along first — walking that perfect tightrope

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between humor and drama, with a strong young female lead and season-long story arcs that actually come to a conclusion — in the end, *Veronica Mars* retains its own character and style. It also appeals to folks who didn't like the fantastical elements of *Buffy* — you know, the ones who didn't get it like we did.

The book in hand was edited by the show's creator, Rob Thomas, and features essays by people with too much time on their hands, but I like it when people write about their enthusiasms. And I particularly enjoyed Thomas's introduction, where he outlines how the show came to be, and his sometimes bemused short intros to each essay.

Don't come to this book if you haven't watched the show. If you have, pick it up only if this sort of minutiae appeals to you. But if it does, you'll have a great time in its pages.

Grease Monkey, by Tim Eldred, Tor Books, 2007, $27.95.

I used to get a real kick out of reading some of the old SF books by Heinlein, Doc Smith, Andre Norton, Clifford D. Simak, and other masters of the genre. I know that they were quite capable of writing serious books, but I remember them for their space adventures and the sheer fun it was to read their books. I miss that sort of story — and no, I'm not waxing nostalgic for my youth. I didn't read SF at that so-called perfect age of fifteen. I was reading mysteries and fantasies then. I stumbled into SF (which I was sure I wouldn't like) in my twenties, through Andre Norton's *Huon of the Horn*. Or rather, it was while looking for more of her books after reading *Huon of the Horn* (since that high fantasy book, it turned out, was an anomaly set against the sorts of stories she normally told).

It turns out that I did like SF, though I'll admit to being a little unsure I'd like Tim Eldred's *Grease Monkey* when I was first handed a copy of it. It's a hardcover collection of single-issue comic books that Eldred has been publishing since the early '90s. I figured, if it was any good, surely I would have heard about it before now? Turns out it was a failing on the part of my local comic shop for not carrying those single issues, because *Grease Monkey* is serious fun.

It's part Carl Barks (of Donald Duck fame — you know, back when it was good), part *Star Trek* (says the guy who only knows it

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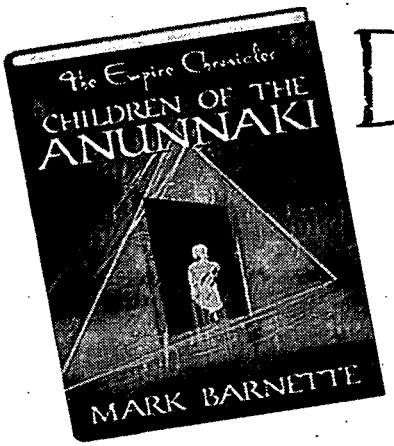

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from the outside, since I've yet to watch an episode), part manga (without the big eyes), and entirely entertaining.

Robin Plotnik is a junior spacecraft mechanic whose assignment, when he arrives on the homeworld flagship, is as a fighter maintenance assistant to Chief Mechanic Mac Gimbensky—a gorilla who, Plotnik is told, ate his last assistant. Gimbensky is a cantankerous chief, seemingly very capable of having done just that, and naturally Plotnik immediately gets into his bad books.

It's not an auspicious start.

But things aren't always what they seem, and after a few bumps on that first day, the two become friends, maintaining the fighter craft for the all-women Barbarian Squadron while trying to stay ahead of the trials and tribulations any group of beings will run into when they're all confined to a closed "world" such as the flagship.

What makes this such an entertaining book is Eldred's attention to detail. The characters are fully realized, but so is the flagship and the historical background of what put men and gorillas together into space. Much of the book is fun space opera, and following the

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complications of the various characters' lives, but for all the laughs, there's also a serious thread underlying the fun.

The art — particularly after page 79 — is all clean lines, expressive expression, detailed space craft mechanics, and great storytelling.

Grease Monkey is a perfect all-ages story. Kids will enjoy the fun and adventure, while adults will pick up on the inside jokes and satire.

Highly recommended.

Emshwiller: Infinity x Two, by Luis Ortiz

Nonstop Press, 2007, $39.95.

Though readers of the pulps might not have realized it, the face of science fiction to which they gravitated in the fifties was greatly influenced by the work of Ed Emshwiller. He produced some 700 covers during that period, and who knows how many interior illustrations. His art was always inventive, wonderfully designed and executed, and though it might seem a little quaint and old-fashioned as we look back on it today, there's no denying the excitement it brought to the newsstands in its time.

Luis Ortiz's previous book was about the life and art of Lee Brown Coye, and this book is just as strong an entry into the history of early science fiction art. From the text, it's obvious Ortiz's research was just as exhaustive for this as it was for that earlier book. He writes with the grace and skill that makes you want to go out and track down Emshwiller's films and the art that isn't reproduced in the book.

But the art that *is* reproduced here is a terrific collection of old pulp covers and interiors, as well as stills from Emshwiller's films, archival photographs, and early art samples. It also features a sweet introduction by Emshwiller's widow, Carol (a fine fiction writer herself), and a forward by Alex Eisenstein, a collector of Emshwiller's art.

I know the audience for this sort of book is small, but if you have any interest in our field's visual history, this book, or the one on Coye, would be a terrific place to start.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Sides, by Peter Straub, Cemetery Dance Publications, 2007, $25.

Breakfast in the Ruins: Science Fiction in the Last Millennium, by Barry N. Malzberg, Baen Books, 2007, $14.

THE novelist Peter Straub is that rare contemporary writer whose work seems genuinely timeless. In elegance and ambition, books such as *Ghost Story*, *Koko*, *The Throat*, *Mr. X*, *lost boy lost girl*, and the collected short fictions of *Houses without Doors* and *Magic Terror* (to name less than half of them), stake their claim to a distinctly American, artistic exurb where the supernatural and the everyday, life-shattering violence and daffodil calm, all coexist. It's a place within spitting distance of the gated communities housing the likes of Updike, Roth, McCarthy, Salter, et al.; not far removed from the sprawl that's grown up around the Gothic manse of Straub's sometime collaborator, Stephen King; it borders in its more overgrown verges briar-rose-hedges and sinister root cellars that are the haunts of Link, Carroll, Crowley, and Evenson, among others. And it's also only a streetcar stop, or, if you're feeling flush, a taxi ride from the flickering neon and broken-bottle detritus of that dive where Block and Rankin go to chase Chandler's ghost, on the nights he's buying a round.

Straub's a good neighbor to all these folks; but after reading *Sides*, his lovely, affecting, and keenly intelligent collection of non-fiction, one gets the impression that, late at night, when all those other writers are in bed, or just waking up, he climbs up the long hill at the edge of his demesne — the spot where, if the moon's just right, you can see both Millhaven and Dunwich — and waits as a small crowd gathers around him. These are neighbors, too, though quiet ones — Flannery O'Connor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Brian Moore, Henry James — folks who, once upon a time, might not have had a lot to say to each other

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but now, with Straub in their midst, might realize they've got quite a bit in common.

Sides collects nearly all of the nonfiction Straub has penned in almost two decades, from 1985 to 2006. It's a gallimaufry that consists of introductions and afterwords to works by other writers — among them Lawrence Block, Bram Stoker, H. G. Wells, Stephen King — as well as "a frivolity" and two essays, one of them the heartbreaking elegy "Mom." There's also a series of short, very funny misprisions, er, appreciations, of Straub's novels, written by his fictive academic doppelgänger Putney Tyson Ridge, Ph.D.

Straub provides brisk and informed introductions to books by Ira Levin *(The Stepford Wives)*, Graham Joyce *(Leningrad Nights)*, and Caitlin Kiernan *(Tales of Pain and Wonder)*, but *Sides* really begins to hit its stride with a hallucinatory riff on Poppy Z. Brite's collection *Are You Loathsome Tonight*, where Straub invokes Flaubert, Bataille, and "The Duino Elegies." It's less an intro than what Straub terms "a kind of aria, a kind of solo" when, later in *Sides*, he touches on Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. In his intro to *Secret Windows*, a collection of essays by Stephen King, Straub provides one of the best analyses of King's writing that I've read: he strips it of ivory tower cant and condescension, and makes a strong case for placing King in the company of the nineteenth-century writer Frank Norris, whose work embraces realism and naturalism, rather than horror.

> "[King's] fundamental assumption...is that writing fiction is a job like any other, and must be done honestly and well. And the basis of any such conviction is that writing done honestly and well carries its own weight, regardless of genre or (vulgar) popularity. Quietly, at the level of the lowest frequencies, King is offering an implicit rebuttal to a notion he finds elitist, absurd, and insulting, that successful commercial fiction by definition must be inferior to fiction of other sorts. Truthfulness — truthfulness of a specific kind — grants any work of fiction authenticity, strength, and dignity, King believes, and a popular commercial writer faces a greater temptation to fudge than his more "literary" colleagues, due to his consciousness of how an artificial turn or change of direction would gratify his

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audience, should he impose it upon the living story."

Take that, Harold Bloom.

Even Straub's more deceptively offhand remarks can nail a writer with a dizzying combination of dead-on accuracy and unexpected leaps of insight —

"Rex Stout managed to stay crisp as a snap-pea for five decades of annual visits to Nero Wolfe's brownstone, but his level of consistency over time is matched only by P. G. Wodehouse, whose Drones Club and Blandings Castle have more in common with Stout's changeless brownstone than may be immediately apparent."

This, alas, is from "Hope to Die," a marvelous essay on Lawrence Block's Scudder series, so readers wanting more of the Wolfe/Wooster equation will have to wait. I haven't read Block's books (though I'm now presold on them). But "Hope to Die" finds that crack in the world that Leonard Cohen wrote about — the place where the light gets in — in this case, the jagged seam where the familiar fabric of crime fiction is torn away to reveal something bigger, stranger, more elemental and more powerful.

* * *

"...the Scudder series...presents violence in its most ideologically troubling form, as a variety of ecstasy. Though you would never guess it from reading the average crime novel, violence and the sacred share a common seam, they walk hand in hand, for both invoke the ultimate things."

The connection between ecstasy and violence, the continual human striving for transcendence through heightened states — sex, the supernatural, music, romantic or obsessive or deranged love — is, of course, one of the things that informs most of Peter Straub's fiction. Which makes it all the more impressive that he can also create such succinct, almost mathematically precise (and cheeky) assessments of, say, the difference between goth and Gothic in an essay on *Dracula* —

"The ever-more-numerous fictions...describing the adventures of contemporary vampires, which adopt the repression vs. sexual anarchy template by inverting it to make the vampire heroic (Repression, boo! Go, you sexy immortal!) are almost always

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utterly enjoyable, but they are 'goth' rather than Gothic: less grand, less inward, and stabilized around a less inclusive vision of human nature. The supernatural has been externalized, therefore tamed, and what we are left with are empowerment fantasies described as 'transgressive.' Stoker's vampires are Gothic, and the transgressive, while immensely seductive, is about as glamorous as a wound."

Straub turns a more antic gaze upon his own oeuvre, writing as Professor Putney Ridge, "long the Chairman and sole member of the Department of Popular Culture at Popham College," "the Sewanee of the West" or "Middlebury writ small." Professor Ridge has turned the act of damning with faint praise into an art form as rarefied as tanka. I excerpt here the final sentences from several of his reviews:

"One wishes that [Straub] had been capable of learning from his own, no doubt bitter, example."

"A trivial bit of juvenilia understandably suppressed very nearly since its publication."

* * *

"Coy, smirking references to jazz musicians are hardly the worst of *Ghost Story*'s exhibitionist failings."

"The title of the novella has no discernible significance whatsoever."

And, my personal favorite:

"The novel does contain some excellent descriptions of snow."

Still, the heart of this collection is "Mom," an autobiographical essay on Straub's midwestern childhood and his parents — a charming, somewhat feckless father who longed for a son who'd play with the Green Bay Packers, and a stoic, fiercely intelligent, often rage-filled mother who juggled a nursing career with the domestic rigors of housework and child-rearing. Straub's father remarks, "You know, I hate art. I don't know why, I just hate it"; his mother's disappointments make her "a resentful cook" who gives voice to endless angry recitations while cleaning the floors. But Straub is too generous a writer and person to pen a bitter memoir of childhood grievances. "Mom," while poignant in its depiction of the nascent writer who appears, cuckoo-like, in the

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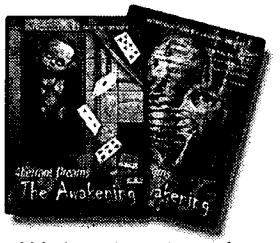

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bewildered brown sparrows' nest, steers a clear course between sentimentality and dry, Garrison Keillor-esque comedy. When, at a distressingly young age, Straub's mother begins to display odd ritualist behaviors and memory lapses, the reader's heart catches; but again, there's no sentimentality here, no Oprah-staged moments of closure or redemption; just real people in real pain, displaying the sort of everyday decency that the media calls Heroism, but which Straub knows is really humanism in its simplest, perhaps greatest, form. "Mom" is an elegy for a parent, a life lost not once but twice, to Alzheimer's and then to death; a meditation on loss that is as moving, in its way, as C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*. It shows Peter Straub at his best, a clear-eyed, deeply humane writer who knows first-hand the darkest, coldest soul-gnawing terrors that the night holds for all of us, yet is unafraid to stand beside his readers and wait for dawn to come.

But it lacks any descriptions of snow.

I read Barry Malzberg's collection of critical essays, *The Engines of the Night*, when it first appeared in 1982, and found it a bracingly dark, often contentious, defiantly

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melancholy insider's take on what at the time still seemed very much a boy's club. Damon Knight, Robert Silverberg, John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov — these, among others, were the guys Malzberg (mostly) admired and wrote about. At the time this grated on me, though I knew it wasn't Malzberg's fault the field still hadn't been successfully colonized by the mistresses of the night, though certainly the feminization of science fiction had begun and was well underway.

Now, reading *Breakfast in the Ruins*, a much-expanded collection that includes work from the '90s and noughts, I can see more clearly what took on the woman's role in the original book: science fiction itself. Malzberg writes with all the passion and fury of a true romantic, one who knows his lover is unworthy of him: of vulgar parentage, often shallow, capricious, ruthless, capable of infinite and subtle infidelities. She will betray him, and does, often —

And yet, and yet. She can be beautiful, possessed of immense wit and even wisdom; brave sometimes, taking risks that other, more domestically inclined lovers avoid; not afraid of political engagement, surprisingly open-minded, welcoming of outsiders. Her narrow-mindedness and conservatism in sexual matters over time gave way to a far more exploratory nature; there were threesomes, foursomes, some darker impulses that might best have been left alone. Some of these forays inclined her sympathies toward ivory tower extremists but, fickle as ever, she remains easily seduced by whatever's new and shining. It's part of her charm; it's what we love about her. Even Malzberg. Methinks the writer doth protest too much.

Breakfast in the Ruins is a delight, though I suspect the author would shake his head dolefully at that assessment. The onetime Schubert Foundation Playwriting Fellow is brilliant, hilarious, and cold-eyed by turns, as unsparing in his judgments upon the failures of the literature he so loves as he is of himself.

> "As a writer who could write a little in a field where almost no one could write at all, as enough of a cynical hack to purposefully manipulate my work and as one who had an excellent understanding of the field by virtue of childhood reading...I was able, I say in all due modesty, to produce a body of work which is without parallel, quantitatively, in the history of the field."

* * *

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If you doubt him, check out the essay titled "Some Notes on the Lone Wolf," which should be required reading for anyone tempted by the glamour of writing novelizations or media tie-ins. In 1973 Malzberg signed on to write ten novels in the Executioner series, for a $27,500 advance (25% upon signing). His John Hancock was on the contracts on January 16. By Valentine's Day he'd delivered the first three books.

None dare call it hackwork: Malzberg is the Iron Man of genre writing. Someone should name an award after him. Elsewhere, there is a wonderful account of working with the legendary Maurice Girodias, as well as a continuing inquiry into the nature of science fiction, and whether the expectations of the reader, or the mere provenance of a science fiction story, have doomed the genre to both literary respectability and denied sf any lasting literary merit. Throughout, Malzberg is both acerbic and laugh-out-loud funny: he bites the hand that feeds him, and I suspect he's typing while doing so.

Near the end of *Breakfast in the Ruins*, one of Malzberg's alter-egos observes, "I'm 67 years old. It's too late for further insights, I think." Perish the thought.

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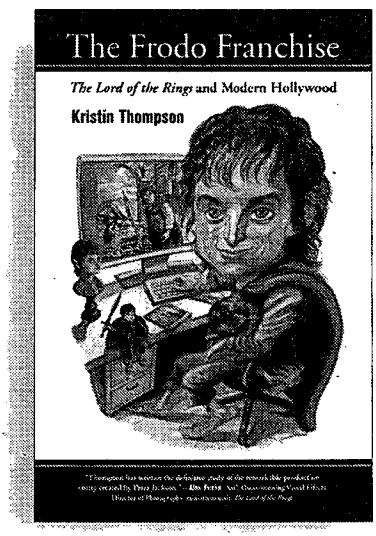

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Fred Chappell says he is currently pondering the essays of Montaigne, reading through Herodotus, and enjoying Warren Rochelle's new novel, Harvest of Changelings. *He is curious about why he reads so many books that make his own stuff look so inferior, but those of us who are developing a taste for these tales of the shadow trade (such as the one we ran in our March 2007 issue) can only hope that whatever feelings of inferiority he might experience won't deter him from spinning out more such fantasies.*

The Diamond Shadow

By Fred Chappell

"WE WERE FOOLS TO COME to this place," I said.

"This place," said the right-hand shadows.

"*Disgrace*," said the left-hand shadows.

"We were fools, Falco," Astolfo said, "before we were invited. You must not lose courage."

"Courage," said the dexter shadows.

"*Rage*," said the sinister.

"I am none a-feared," I said. "But I mislike these shadows that mock my phrases."

"Phrases."

"*Mazes*."

"The shadows do not speak," Astolfo said. "They stand silent in their long corridors. Only a peculiarity of this dim hall's construction makes them seem to speak. When we stop, they will stop. They own no breath."

"Breath."

"*Death*."

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And so I said nothing more until we had pushed open the heavy door that blocked the corridor and swung it shut behind us. It might seem these doors had been hung to keep back the shadows, for the space we entered was bright with ensconced torches and batteries of flaming candles that swathed in soft glow each object here. There were a good two dozen people ranged about — grave courtiers, expensively appointed ladies with their maids and young daughters, quick-smiling lads in silken trunks and with curiously sheathed short swords — and though they made the noises a pleasant company makes, they now fell silent and looked upon Astolfo and me with undisguised curiosity. I felt as if I had come into a court of petty royalty, though our hostess was no more than a thrice-widowed countess. So Astolfo had informed me.

A countess then, yet she sat like a princess in her high-backed chair of stout oak with its carvings of gryphons and lion's heads and fleurs-de-lis and with seat and back so sumptuously brocaded. There was no dais, but a respectful clear space surrounded this chair as the men and women kept their distance. They watched closely as we approached, as if they had gathered there for no purpose other than to observe Astolfo and me.

We made proper obeisance and Astolfo addressed her in a confident, easy voice. "Milady Triana, we have come at your bidding."

"At my invitation, Master Astolfo. I have no power to order you about."

Was it the bulk of the chair that made her look so petite? Though her face showed her to be a woman of handsome middle years, the way she was perched upon her seat caused her to appear no larger than a child. Her voice, however, possessed the sound of old age, not quavery, but with an uncertain timbre and a thinly veined crackle. Her hair was blonde streaked with white and when she moved her head it seemed to shimmer with a quick opalescence. Her eyes were not unfocused but fixed at a point somewhere between herself and the person whom she addressed, as if she looked inward more than outward. This gaze gave her a distracted air, though her words were clear enough.

"We are honored by your kind invitation," he replied and bowed again, pulling back his stiff linen cape with his left hand and sweeping the right before him like a violoncellist drawing his bow.

"May I inquire into the health of your wife and children?" the countess asked.

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"I have none," Astolfo said. "As an unfortunate, I live alone with my mute manservant Mutano and with this man, Falco," — he nudged and I bowed — "and with such house servants as I require. It is sometimes a cheerless existence, almost eremitic."

"But perhaps this way of life has enabled you to gain the skills and arts you need in your cult of shadows. I have been informed that your craft requires constant and stringent application."

"I have labored in my discipline, but maybe to a quick-witted chap it would come more easily."

Now she said nothing for a moment and paused to take in the figure of my plumpish, balding master with his swift hands and his unaccustomed finery and the mild gray eyes that never threatened.

It was evident to me that she already knew about Astolfo, and perhaps about me also, and that her questions had been put merely to give her time to form impressions. Yet I was a little surprised when she said, "I think that we have met aforetimes."

He paused before answering. "I believe we have not met before, milady. I am certain I would remember one so gracious and charming."

Her tone sharpened as suddenly as a gust of icy wind off a frozen lake. "If I say that we have met, then so it is. It is true that my mind is not so agile as formerly, nor so integral in its workings, yet I must recall Astolfo the thief who filched the shadow of the assassin Torrodo and delivered it to his mortal enemy to ravage at will."

"The stories of those days long past are more rumor than history, milady."

"'Twill do no good to set at me crosswise," she said. "If I say we have met, we have met. If I say you have done such-and-such, you have done so." And she drummed her heels under her broad skirt of figured white silk against the stretcher of her chair, as an impatient child might do.

"Milady." Astolfo bowed once more.

"I do not much like shadows," she declared. "Creeping, sneaking things they are. People say that you are a thief who steals shadows to sell for profit. I do not understand how anyone can steal a shadow. But if a shadow is a thing, I suppose it can be stolen. There are thieves everywhere. I am continually missing rings and gold and silver bangles, tiaras, and suchlike. Some thieves are in this room now."

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"Milady."

"Not you, Astolfo, but these others. Oh, I might tell you tales about this crowd that you would scarcely credit. Fine lot they are, very fine indeed."

Most of the assemblage must have heard her words, but none showed sign of response. They continued to amble about and chat together in muted voices. I received the impression that they were accustomed to the countess's cross outbursts and took little account of them.

"Perhaps there have been misunderstandings," Astolfo said. "I am sure we are in gentle company here among these nobles."

"Never believe it," she said. "Why do you insist on contradicting my observations? Do you think me a fool?"

"Oh no, milady. Never."

"Sometimes I *am* a fool, the worst sort. There is a cloud that comes into my head so that there are hours when I do not know who I am. I am not myself and I lose all placement in the world. That is when these betrayers take advantage, when they perceive I am not all that I need to be."

I looked the crowd over again, but they were as placid and unconcerned as before.

"Why would anyone wish to purchase shadows from you? Nasty, whispering, slithering things, always dogging one's heels or leaning against the walls, wearing sullen faces, never a cheerful countenance among 'em. Tell me why."

"Oh," said Astolfo lightly, "I am often surprised by the various usages people put shadows to. Generally they are employed only to lend coolness or a certain kind of atmosphere to an area. They promote intimacy of discourse and soften the edges of social interchange. Harpists and lutenists may be hired to play softly at a gathering, furnishing a pleasant background; shadows may serve the same purpose. But there are a myriad other uses. Perhaps you know that winemakers often steep wines in certain tints of shadow to gain subtlety and depth for vintages that lack sufficient character.... A thousand, thousand usages. Do you yourself not employ a coterie of shadows in the hallway leading to this grand salon? I assume you had them placed there to unsettle visitors of unknown purpose, to serve to test those who come to visit you."

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"I do not desire them. They have flocked to my walls unbidden. Unless — " She looked around at the company with bitter eyes and continued in a low, angry mutter, " — unless some of my betrayers have brought them in to do me evil. Since my mother died, I no longer can say who is my loyal friend and who my secret enemy."

"I am sorry to hear of your loss," Astolfo said. "When did this happen?"

"It might have been yesterday. Or it might have been some years ago." Her eyes blinked wide; a startled look passed over her face. "It might have been tomorrow."

"It is a sorrowful loss at any time."

She waved a graceful, brightly bejeweled hand at me. "Why does your young friend keep silent? I am suspicious of those who stare and stare and say naught."

"Falco is newly from the farm," Astolfo explained. "He is unfamiliar with polished society and fears to make a fool of himself. But as an aide to me, he does well enough."

"In your business with those shadows."

He smiled gently, nodded.

"Well, it is about filthy shadows that I bade you come."

"I am honored by your kind invitation."

"Why must you continually abrade against me? I say I bade you come at my deliberate insistence. I do not know you well enough to invite you. Few there are these days whom I invite. I cannot easily trust anyone."

"You have no one you might confide in?"

She clapped her hands, making a surprisingly sharp report. At once the murmuring of the company desisted. They all fell silent as an elderly man rose from where he sat on a curve-armed bench against the wall, walked slowly to a large table with a white runner-cloth, and lifted from it a small casket of embossed leather bound with iron straps. As he was bringing it to the Countess Trinia, she waved him aside toward Astolfo.

"Please examine the jewel there," she said. "I would know your thought of it."

He took the casket from the old gentleman and opened it to disclose, lying on plush purple velvet, a diamond that seemed as large as a crab apple. Though I stood some seven paces away, I could see what a brilliant

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light it gave off, how it gleamed with the candlelight. It was as if it captured the mellow flames and made them one within itself and then dispersed that glow in a thousand warm points throughout this broad salon.

Astolfo looked at it for long moments where it lay and then said to the countess, "Have I permission to take it in hand, milady?"

She assented.

Between thumb and forefinger he held it before his eyes, peering closely. Then he wheeled slowly on his heel, bringing the stone round in a complete circle and turning it over and over to expose every surface. Polished but uncut, it throbbed as the torchlight and candlelight pierced its cool center. Then he laid it carefully back in place and bowed to the old courtier, who returned it to the long table.

"Well," said the countess, "what do you see there?"

"I am not certain," Astolfo answered. "At first I thought I saw a flaw, but then it seemed more a smudge. Yet nothing mars the outer surface. If only I had brought hither my enlarging glass to examine it more closely."

"No," she said, "no magical glasses. I do not trust them. What is to be seen must be observed by the unaided eye. You shall say if you see what I see."

"I saw a shadow."

"There!" She clapped her hands again, startling me and all the company around. "I too saw the shadow, a horrid, dark, oozy, smoky thing wriggling in the very core of my stone. It was not there before. My diamond was formerly all clear, as bright and sharp in its glitter as starlight. Now it has gone golden, yellowish. I do not like that. Every day it loses value, does it not?"

"It is an immensely valuable stone, milady."

"No. I tell you it is forfeiting its worth to the hours that pass. Why will you always quarrel with me?"

"If it is not as bright as formerly, it may be damaged. But I do not know the cause. May I ask where it was found and how it came into your hands?"

"You may not. I am weary of debating every point with you. Chrobius there — " she indicated the old man who had borne the jewel casket " — will give such history as you may need to know. My head hurts insufferably and my mind slips like a donkey on greasy cobblestones. I am

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done with this audience. When you find out the problem with my best diamond, when you have found a remedy for it, you must return and inform me and I shall reward you most generously. I do hope you will not quarrel with me about this commission I have laid upon you. I am sick of your controversies."

"Milady."

The old man came to us, bowed, and padded away to a door at the farther end of the salon, and we followed at a courteous distance.

THIS SMALL ROOM off the main salon was quiet. A single bowl-shaded lamp on the table between four chairs in the center gave off a genial glow and Chrobius put the jewel casket beneath it. He wore a thin, silvery beard that came to a point below the V of his soft collar; his voice was gentle, weary-sounding, and he displayed the slender, ivory fingers of a patrician philosopher. He seated us and offered refreshment, which Astolfo, and I, following his example, declined. Then Chrobius sat in the chair between us and told us that almost nothing was known of the provenance of this diamond that so exercised the countess.

"How now?" Astolfo asked. "So handsome a jewel must have a voluminous history."

"Perhaps so, but it will be a history of which we are ignorant." Chrobius's voice was extraordinarily calm, almost hypnotic in its measured cadences. "It was discovered among the effects of the countess's second husband, Tyrin Blanzo. The Blanzi were a family of merchants quite powerful at one time but latterly fallen upon scanty luck. Like many another trading company, they had ventured ships into the perilous seas northward, hoping for trade among the woodland tribes of Justerland and with the fisher folk of the Aurora Isles. But tempest and piracy had dealt severe and at last mortal blows to the Blanzi trading enterprises, and nowadays their finances rested upon the rents of their estates. It had been supposed by some that this diamond was derived from the profits of trade, but no record of its provenance was extant."

"How long after the death of Blanzo before its discovery?" Astolfo asked.

"A good two years," Chrobius replied. "The countess had already remarried and thought that for economy purposes she ought to try to make

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an inventory of her late husband's possessions. In going through one of his sea chests, she found the casket with the jewel."

"Was it, upon discovery, in the same condition as now?"

"I am unconversant in the lore of stones, but meseemeth it has changed since that time. Perhaps it has dulled somewhat. The countess says it has 'goldered' and that seems as apt a term as may be."

"And the countess herself? Has she changed since the advent of this diamond?"

He hesitated. "I should not like to say too much. She herself speaks of certain misapprehensions to which she is prey. You heard her say so. Whether this jewel has connection to that, I cannot say. It appears very unlike, but it was at that time she began to complain. Some who have known her claim to have noticed a change, but she was always something bewildered in the world."

"Are there those who wish her harm?"

"You see our little universe here, so like a court of rural royalty. There is hardly anyone who is not wished some degree of harm by another. The countess is subject to arbitrary humors and peremptory demands, some say. Injured feelings follow in her train."

"Have you ever felt the brunt of her impulsiveness?" Astolfo asked.

"Not I, no. But it is well known that all women are prey to changeable moods. Her position is precarious and demands perhaps more *will-call* than she may possess."

"You use an odd term, '*will-call*.' What doth it signify? I am unfamiliar with it."

Chrobius smiled in the manner of an indulgent schoolmaster. "It would occur but rarely in your kind of business, I think. It is a philosophic term, meaning something like 'fortitude' or 'martial spirit.' Perhaps 'manliness' comes closest to its meaning."

"Would anyone design the countess bodily harm? Would anyone be bold to take her life?"

He rubbed the point of his beard with thumb and forefinger as if feeling the texture of cloth. "I do not know. I should think it not likely. Her last husband, the third, that count of some vague area he called Ondormo, was a dark and bitter man who never showed real love for her. But he has been banished by the countess and lives in exile."

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"So she is not thrice widowed."

"She accounts him as dead."

"Where might he inhabit?"

"Again, I do not know. Some have said the rugged coast of Clamorgra is pierced with caves and he coils within one of them like an adder in its hole. There are other rumors also."

"What were the points of contention?"

"There are rumors only, something about the division of a property. But I credit none of it. He was headstrong, willful, arrogant; she is, as you see, sometimes distracted and of sudden waywardness. There may have been little other than a conflict of wills."

Astolfo took up the diamond and held it against the lamplight, turning it carefully. "I regret that she will not allow close inspection with a jeweler's glass," he murmured.

Chrobius smiled slowly. "As to that — " he said, and produced from a sleeve pocket a silver loupe, intricately enchased. "I can see no harm in your looking at it and cannot say why she objects. Probably it is no more than one of her personal superstitions. In these bad days, she lacks all proper and confident will-call." He handed the loupe to Astolfo.

I took for granted that the shadow master was expert in the knowledge of precious stones, as he is in so many other matters. But as he studied the object, bringing it closer to the lamp and withdrawing it, revolving it over and over, his expression troubled into perplexity and he began to hum to himself singsong, a sign that he had struck upon a puzzle.

Finally he laid it back, almost reverently, upon the casket plush. "It would be shameful if such a prize should be an instrument of harm," he said.

"Do you think that it is?" I asked.

Instead of answering my query, he transferred it to Chrobius. "You, sir, do you believe that it is?"

The old gentleman gave his beard a short tug. "Today all my replies are but professions of ignorance," he said. "I do not know."

"Falco and I must consult our sources," Astolfo said. "In the library shelves at my house there may be some helpful folios. If you will guide us, Chrobius, back to the corridor of whispering shadows, we can find our way from there."

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"No need for that nuisance," he replied. "There is another way, speedier and more pleasant, to the entrance."

"Thank you for your kindness," Astolfo said. "Yet even so, we should like to retrace our steps. Those shadows seem to have secrets they desire to share."

"I think you can gain but little from them, but I shall be glad to accompany you the way you came." He set off slowly, then paced lightly through the salon. The countess was absent and her tall, throne-like chair had been set against the wall. A few gabbling late-stayers stood about and seemed to take no notice of our passage. At the door to the corridor Chrobius made a final bow and bade us farewell.

My mount at this period was a dapple gray cob of complaisant temper. My overly large colleague, Mutano, had chosen this horse — Torta, she was called — from Astolfo's stable and handed the mare to me with that fleering sardonic smile that meant he had picked out an easy mount because he considered it best suited to my abilities. As to that, he was mistaken, but I accepted the reins in good grace and resolved to take excellent care of the animal. I could see that Torta had her points: not fleet but powerful and of steady courage. She would not flee a set-to.

Astolfo had turned off on the way back to his mansion with a salute signifying he would return in a short time. I could see he was headed into Tardocco, but what his errand might be I could not know. It was late afternoon and the sun was just at the roof edges of this busy port city, now settling out of its workaday bustle, readying for the pleasures of twilight and early evening.

I stabled Torta and looked well to her, then went for a stroll about the grounds. Early summer gladdened the grasses and trees and some of the rare flowering shrubs Astolfo was partial to. It occurred to me that he might have gone to consult one of his friends, an astute jeweler probably, in the town, and I thought I might gain a little credit with him by some quick study. I went into the mansion, into the great library, and strolled to the area where the volumes on stones were kept. By this time, I had achieved some familiarity with this extensive collection of books and manuscripts, though I knew Astolfo would not agree. He held me as being only a little more learned than a runt beagle.

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It had been a long three seasons since I broke into this house, hoping to be apprehended as a thief and then taken in as the shadow master's apprentice. My wish had come true — and had brought more burthen than I had bargained for. Yet I knew enough about the subject of stones to begin by looking into a late edition of the Grand Albertus and to follow its hints into Rhodius's *Gemmae luminosae et lucidae*, thence to Cassurio's *Lux opali et carbunculi*.

It was in these latter pages that I came upon the story of the lady Erminia. This antique baroness always wore a dazzling opal in her hair. The resplendently milky stone closely matched the character of its mysterious owner, sparkling brightly when her mood was lightest, spitting out red gleams when she angered, clouding like a wheel-parted lane puddle when she wept. When in her later years her heart was broken by a perfidious lover, the opal cracked into five pieces, spilling its various, shattered colors upon the air and extorting from the miserable lady her dying breath. When her spirit passed from her, the five fragments of the stone crumbled to a dull gray powder, as did the shrunken form of Erminia herself.

I wondered if the story of this opal might suggest fruitful application to the case of our countess and when I mentioned the possibility to Astolfo he did not instantly reject it. He professed surprise at finding me searching in the library when he arrived from the city but warned me that the study of precious stones was a complicated and uncertain matter. "Superstition collects about expensive gems as thick as rumors around a beautiful woman," he said. "And, as with the woman, the more pure and powerful the virtues, the darker are the conjectures that swarm. The brightest and clearest diamond will be accounted the most perilous to its owner."

"How does that come about?" I asked.

"Partly because of envy," he said. "If you have not the means nor the good luck to possess the fine sapphire that I possess, thou'lt impute every sort of dire quality to it and find ready belief among your rabble friends."

"But is none of the hearsay true? Ominous tales about jewels are as thick as the winter fur of an Aurora wolf."

"Some knowledge is certain. I for one would not wear a black pearl," Astolfo said. "And I would not allow a mumbling priest with his ill-smelling censer and his murky sprinklings to come within half a league

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of any topaz I might have in store. But 'ware you of anyone who says that a sard has been tainted by the poison of a dragon who guarded it in his hoard."

"Are there any so gullible as to believe?"

"There is many a merchant sharp-eyed in accounting, in the surveying of lands, in the lading of ships, in the interest rates of lending who will lose all compass when he come to the subject of gems. Those little bits of gleam seem to have been created to drive men's wits astray. This is another quality they share with women."

"Is not the countess right to be concerned? Her diamond seems of no steadfast state. It is changing from its former being, is it not?"

"'Twould seem so. But what have you observed about the lady? We had but short time in her company, yet I found her a striking figure."

"She is a conundrum," I said. "I could not even judge her age."

"Tell me of her shadow."

"The flicker of torches and candles made observation difficult, but I thought she possessed a double shadow."

"Two primaries, you mean — apart from all the penumbrae caused by multiple light."

"Two shadows that she would possess in any place."

"How would you describe them?"

"Both were small," I said. "One was a playful, gray shade, lively in motion, with flirting, fluttering outlines. The other was of a cast much darker, its shape somewhat crooked, its edges crabbed and ragged. It was bent in upon itself, reclusive, whereas the first shadow was an outgoing thing, ready to engage with any surface or any slant of light."

"Which of the two would you say matched the countess herself in body and in spirit?"

I hesitated. "Neither of them. Perhaps both together in some way I cannot explain. Yet not the both of them at once connect well to her."

"And the diamond?"

"I could not well see it from where I stood. Its size is its salience. 'Twould be shameful if it is damaged, for a jewel of that size, if it be perfect, might bring a small kingdom as its price."

"And the velvet?"

"Velvet?"

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"It was perched upon the casket's purple cushion. What did you see there?"

Long I thought. "There was a little space where the nap was depressed, just next the diamond."

"Good." Astolfo nodded. "Perhaps this estimable gem had a companion in the casket."

"Do you think the diamond might possess some spiritual bond with the countess?" I asked. "For I have read how a certain lady Erminia was so closely soul-yoked with an opal that — "

"Enough of that old tale," Astolfo said. "It is as moldy as a cave for cheeses."

"Is it not true?"

"Even a truth, if too often cited, may lose some of its savor. And that instance carries us too far from our present one. We must keep close our attentions upon the countess. What kind of person will cast two primary shadows?"

This was a question familiar to apprentices. "One whose twin died at birth. Or one who has been loved, adored beyond all reason, by someone who lies in the grave. Or someone whose mind is distracted, split into two minds, so that the man or woman is split into two. Or a mother or father who early lost two dear children. Or — "

"Good enough," he said and gave me a square look. "You are not the blockhead you once were. Now tell me, what manner of person will cast three shadows?"

"I am not certain. I have heard it said that priests who serve three gods or a triple god in one may drop three umbrae, but I have no real knowledge of this."

"Sometimes there are born," said Astolfo, "certain persons who embody the spirits of three others, being themselves but vessels. They will be shadowed triply, but none of the shades belongs to them personally and are but evidences of these entities that inhabit them. Among women, however, there occur figures who are themselves three in one and embody the three great powers of womanhood: the capricious candor of the child, the copious beauty of the adult, and the age-wise, humorous, secret lore of the crone. These triple figures are rare in the world and much revered by members of the female gender when recognized. I believe the Countess

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Trinia to be such a person. As such, she will be a remarkable, strong leader of her people, if she is not attacked in some fashion."

"She is a beautiful woman," I said, "and it is easy to find in her much of the child, the spoiled brat. But I saw no trace of the crone about her. And I saw only two shadows."

"She complains of being distracted in her mind, of not being at one with herself as formerly she was."

"If she lost one of her shadows, that might mean that one-third of her self was missing."

"Lost? Stolen?"

"I cannot say."

"I will suspect theft," Astolfo declared. "Chrobius has warned us that there is something not right about the little 'universe,' as he called it, of her great hall. We need to pursue further. I am particularly interested in that diamond that was shown us. We must examine it at leisure, with our library of jewel lore and history at hand."

"How is that possible?"

"You will have to steal it," Astolfo said. "But only as a temporary condition. Being honest gentles, we would never plan to keep it."

"Steal it? I? I could never — "

"Are you eager to learn the art of shadows or not? This is but a simple early step."

"Very well," I said, but my heart lurched within me like a young horse balking at a leap.

I HAD MADE no long-drawn objections to Astolfo's statement that I was to purloin the diamond from the countess. He and his manservant Mutano, who was my constant and ever vigilant drillmaster, would surely spend some weeks educating and training me for this nocturnal exercise.

So I thought, but once again I had failed to apprehend the design.

The theft was to take place on the second night from today — or rather, in the second morning, for I was to enter the grounds of the countess's petite palace two hours before daybreak and to make my departure just as the earliest dawn-light brushed the rambling brick walls surrounding the edifice.

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"We must be brisk about this business," Astolfo said, "for I believe that the countess stands in danger to herself and to the little realm that is loyal to her. The task is not so difficult as it may seem. This is no iron fortress high-perched upon some vulturous peak but only a small habitation of many doors and corridors, many adits and exits. Formerly it was a religious institution with the great salon as its principal place of worship and the outlying rooms and buildings serving as quarters for the clerics and devotees. 'Twas never constructed to keep out intruders, expert or clumsy. Mutano will attempt to subtract some of your natural clumsiness, but it is unnecessary for you to gain the handiness of an experienced burglar. The place is not well guarded. The wealth of the countess is comparatively small — though I would not say meager — and her palace holds no strategic military position."

"What if I am apprehended?"

"'Twould be a sour business," he replied, "for you will be recognized and the surmise shall be that you have come for the diamond."

"As will be the case."

"And so they will attempt to discover if you have entered there at my order and whether I am involved in some intrigue against the countess."

"What is to be my answer?"

"Why, that you came to thieve out of your own cupidity and that you have betrayed my trust in you and that I will be in a fury against you when I find out."

"Will they be satisfied?"

"After some hours of torture, you would undoubtedly reveal all."

"I do not savor this experiment."

"Mutano will supply you with a delightful drug. The first moment you are threatened with torture, you have only to swallow this bolus to die a swift and rapturous death."

His gray-eyed gaze never clouded its mild steadiness. When I looked at Mutano, he gave me a broad smile and held up a little sphericle, as carmine in color as the seed of the pomegranate.

"Very well," I said.

Since the enclosing walls were of brick and attained to a height of no more than half again my own, my scaling apparatus consisted of a light

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horsehair rope equipped with a small, three-pronged hook of iron. Only the claw-ends were naked; the rest of the hook was sheathed in soft leather to deaden its sound against the brick. My weapons were to be a short sword with a blade three hands in length, a poniard to tuck into the breast of my chamois doublet, and a short-steeled dirk hidden in my left boot.

"This is feeble armory," I complained. "If I am caught, there will be more than one to come against me."

"If you bear more weaponry, you shall go clacking about like a pelican," Astolfo said. "Your only real advantage is a stealth that more blades would but diminish. Graceful stealth, that is your only method. And for that, you shall have the concealment of a shadow."

"Truly?" I was enheartened by the prospect. Astolfo had not yet trusted me to wear a shadow. I was too fumble-footed, he said, too cocky-jerky in my movements. The sturdiest shadow he drew about me would soon disintegrate to tatters and giblets, lose all its dark luster, and befoul with my sweats and farts.

But now I was to don one and I began to think that this was a real engagement, after all, and not a mere exercise drill to sharpen my skills and broaden my education. Of course, that would mean that the scarlet suicide dosage was a real and earnest poison and that the prospect of torture was not a figment of fancy. I began to have a creeping uneasiness of mind, but there was no turning back. I had given my Yea and could never live down changing to Nay or shill-I-shall-I.

One sandglass before daybreak was my time to enter the palace compound. "Late-reveling courtiers do not rise at cockcrow," Astolfo explained, "and so there will be early light, fore-dawning and then dawn. A black shadow would be as noticeable as a camelopard and a gray one as visible as mist. So we must resort to the colors, Mutano. What tints should we drape about our daybreak thief?"

Mutano replied with a swift twittering of his fingers. I had puzzled out much of the sign language in which master and mute manservant conversed and had learned that they communicated in at least three different gestural dialects. What they were signaling now I could not fathom.

Astolfo smiled humorously and told me that Mutano thought I should have choice of colors since I was to be the wearer. "What then do you choose?"

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The study of shadow color is long and intricate and I had but barely touched upon it in my reading. Since whatever tints I named would be declared mistaken, I made the obvious choices. "If the day is to be fair and bright, the early light will be purple changing to yellow and silver," I said. "Perhaps a dun color might pass without note."

As I expected, my colleagues grinned at my blunder.

"Well then, Falco," Astolfo said, "it is time for a hasty lesson in the hues of shadows." He signed to Mutano to draw the curtains of the tall library windows so that we were left in a dimness close to dark. Then he went to a small oil lamp sitting upon the smaller table, lit the wick with a single striking of flint, and set a concave, brightly polished mirror behind the lamp. He motioned me to step close to the table and when I did he laid flat upon it a blank sheet of snowy paper.

"How many kinds of primary light have we in the room?" he asked.

"Two," I replied. "A strong white one from the mirrored lamp and a duller, softer one that seeps through the linen curtains."

"Very well. Now observe the shadow upon this paper. What do you see?" He took up a small dagger from the tabletop, customarily kept there to break the seals of documents, and stood it perpendicular to the surface with his fingertip.

"I see two shadows. The one produced by the lamp is bluish; the other, a dusty yellow, comes from the window light."

"That is what you believe you see," Astolfo said. He signed to Mutano to draw the heavy satin drapes over the curtains. "What do you see now?"

"The blue shadow made by the lamp glare has turned black."

"And the edges?"

"They were a little indistinct before. Now they are sharp."

He nodded and Mutano opened the drapes. Astolfo doused the mirrored lamp.

"The dagger shadow now?"

"It is a thin, gray wash, dim. A common shadow, I should call it."

"There are no common shadows — you have been taught this lesson many times. The lamplight and the curtained light are complementary and result in a falsity of vision. Your eyes deceive you because of this commixture of lights. When you are at your business in the palace of the countess, there will be two kinds of light. The early light of the east will

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commingle with the retreating darkness of the rest of the sky, a dark gray tending to mauve. The shadow you wear must be of a complementary color that will not be invisible to sight — that is not possible — but only deceptive to it."

"What color, then?"

"I put it to you."

"I can do no better than the evidence of my senses, deceived though they may be," I said. "This mild blue is complementary, is it not?"

"It is one of the complementaries, but do not forget that as the hour wears, the light will change in intensity and hue."

"So then — ?"

"We shall have a parti-colored shade of several tints," Astolfo said. "They shall flow in and out of one another like the shades in a rainbow where a waterfall pours into the pool of a forest stream. In this wise, you may go from place to place and seem to be only a part of the natural changes of morning."

It did not sound plausible. "But will not so many colors present a garish, anomalous sight in a peaceful dawning?"

"Do you trust already the depth of your knowledge in this lore?"

"I suppose I must not. From what personage did you gain this shadow of many colors?"

"From the renowned actor Ortinio. A man who has portrayed many characters with true and convincing manner will have a various and variable shadow. But this particular shadow lacketh strong texture. It is a consequence of the actors' trade that they have but pallid personalities themselves and must rely upon the playwright to supply them with character. The shadow must be supported by an undergarment. You shall wear a many-colored tunic of several light fabrics to help to sustain the delusion. The correct stratagem with colored shadows is to cause men to see what they already believe they see."

"Very well. How am I to enter the grounds of the palace?"

He laid down the dagger, took up a stick of sharpened charcoal, and began sketching a series of boxes upon the paper. "Here is a rough plan of the palace and the grounds. How shall you proceed? Where do you think you should try entrance?"

"That depends upon where the stone is kept," I said. "Best to come as

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close as possible to that place unless it be heavily guarded and most closely watched. If it be so, then better to enter at a more distant point and make way to it by degrees."

Mutano and Astolfo traded gazes, nodding in agreement.

"And where will the diamond lie?" Astolfo asked.

"I cannot say. I think the countess would want it close by her, but now she has begun to mistrust her faculties. Perhaps she entrusts to Chrobius or another counselor for its safety. Perhaps it is in a separate room by itself under armed guard."

"Will you then steal into three places at once?"

"Time is lacking. On three succeeding nights I might do so, but the choice to begin with is easy. I would try the room set apart for it is where I would have less chance of being recognized."

Again the pair nodded agreement.

"Can you find this place on our little map?" Astolfo pushed the paper toward me.

His sketch showed a long north-south rectangle with the large palace building against the east wall, flanked on both sides by a dozen adjoining boxes. In the middle of the whole he had drawn a box divided into two and this I took to be an armory and barracks for the guards. He had not drawn entrances there, but I supposed it to have four, faced in opposite directions.

"Here." I touched the third box on the left of the main palace. "I can go over the wall, onto the roof, and then along to the left."

"Well enough," he said. "I believe that to be a sort of dormitory for the bachelor courtiers. I picture them sleeping in their cots, giving off wine-fumy snores, as you tiptoe cat-like above them. Only look below when you come to the corner and begin your descent, to make certain that guards are not hiding out of sight in the several doorways to lay hands upon you."

"I shall be wary."

But his warning was a prediction.

The night passed slowly and as soon as I had made my cautious, finger-straining descent of the terra-cotta drainpipe and the corner of the building, eight burly guardsmen appeared as if summoned by a silent bell.

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Beyond them a group of twenty or so stood in close order in the great courtyard. Six of the eight ringed me with drawn blades while a seventh sprang to pin my arms behind my back. The eighth, a villainous, scar-faced captain every bit as large as Mutano, searched me over efficiently, tossing away my short sword and dagger and fishing from my boot the favorite little dirk I had thought so cleverly hidden.

"Your name?" he asked in a voice that was accustomed to transmuting the blood of new recruits to cold cat piss.

"Tombolo," I said, naming the neighbor farm boy who had tormented my earliest years with bullying.

"Doubtful," he grunted. "Your occupation?"

"Thief," I said.

"Even more doubtful," he growled and his ugly brothers-in-arms seconded his statement with derisive giggles.

"How came you here?"

"I say no more. Do your worst."

"So we may — and without your permission. But please, I entreat you, answer one thing more. Why do you come clothed in this ridiculous, gaudy motley? A man, be he thief or sea cook, will be seen in it seven leagues off."

I looked down at myself and was astonished. No subtle shadow of slowly shifting tints and flamy shapes enwrapped my shoulders, torso, and arms. Instead, I wore a filmy, light mantle or robe of ungainly cut all pieced together of vivid ribbons, with colors of lime, scarlet, azure, emerald, ember-gray, and inky purple. Now that I saw it I could feel its weight upon me, slight but palpable.

"See his face," crowed my chief captor. "His mouth hangs slack like a gate unhinged. Is he not the very paragon of ijjits? Should not the countess take him just as he stands for her court jester? — But hold. He is too tall for the office of jester. We must subtract an ell or so." He drew his sword and came close. "Where shall we lessen you, Sir Fool? Shall we take from the bottom?" He thwacked me across the knees with the flat of his blade. "From the top?" He scratched a filthy thumbnail across the knob of my throat. "Or from the middle?" He traced the sword tip across my chest, tearing open the flimsy contraption of ribbons.

All his smug japeries brought forth unbounded hilarity from his

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whiskery, overfed troop, and I vowed that if ever I enlisted in a guard troop, I would choose one whose leader did not fancy himself a humorist. But at this moment I was so abashed by my capture and, more, by my ribbony motley, that I could form no response but to repeat my former challenge: "Do your worst."

"Our worst?" he said and laughed a gravelly long minute. "Sir Fool, you would not beg for the worst if you could conceive what it might be."

A voice, cheerful, familiar, mild but incisive, came from behind the ring of soldiers: "The worst is mine."

With this sentence, the troop parted ranks and Astolfo came ambling toward me. He was dressed in his military best, a sea-colored caftan belted with a broad sash of cloth-of-gold, a short-sleeved red cloak, a tall, broad-brimmed hat with a white plume. A sword hung from his left shoulder in a brightly jeweled sheath and he bore a tall lance in his left hand. He came directly to me and said again, "The worst is mine," and with that he balled his right hand and delivered me such a blow to the neck that I fell backward on the ground and the dawning sky, the roof of the building, and the faces of Astolfo and the soldiers twirled 'round in my sight like fern leaves circling the mouth of a drain.

I tried to speak, but the blow to my neck, just there at the base of my throat, had made words impossible. I could not cough or croak and heaved for breath like a fresh-landed carp.

"Stand him up," Astolfo commanded, and when the captain gestured, two obscenely grinning troopers jerked me to my feet. If they had not gripped me on both sides by elbow and shoulder, I surely would have toppled again.

Astolfo strode round in a circle, striking the ground with the butt of his steel-tipped lance and seeming to be in deep and furious thought. Finally he halted and addressed the guards at large:

"Gentlemen! Behold the spectacle that treacherous ingratitude and sneaking rebellion may make of a man. This Falco, when I first took him into my employ, was but an unlettered, unmannered peasant boy still aromatic from dunging the stony fields of his father. Like many another of elder years, I trusted his innocence and gave him a berth in my household and a place at my table. His only duties were to better himself

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with study and to perform some light labors under the guidance of my faithful manservant."

He ground the lance butt into the dust and paused. "But see him now. He has wantonly entered your palace compound, intent on I know not how many villainies. He came armed and that is always a proof of evil purpose. He has clothed himself in this tatterdemalion ragtaggery for no reason I can put name to. This outfit belonged to my young sister who wore it to Midsummer Eve festivals when she was a child of twelve years or so. Perhaps he thought 'twould serve to excuse him as a madman if captured rather than the perfect natural he proves to be."

The soldiers laughed with hearty appreciation and Astolfo came to stand before me again. "It was a happy accident that led me to discover, by means of certain papers I found in his quarters, that he planned to come here tonight and steal what valuables he could lay hands on. Then he would hide them away in my house and one night before the last quarter of the moon he would slit my throat as I lay sleeping, ransack my meager belongings, and join with the infamous pirate Morbruzzo to plunder all the city of Tardocco, murdering and burning."

He lifted the butt of the lance and thrust it heavily into my belly. My knees went water; my gut surged with pain. "As soon as I found these darksome, infernal papers, I hurried here to warn your good minister Chrobius of Falco's miscreant plans. That is why you were all turned out for the successful capture. The countess will be pleased with your dutiful performance."

He turned his back upon me and lifted his voice which, though still mild in tone, carried with powerful strength. "Look upon him and 'ware you," he declaimed. "See what the low taverns and fleshpots of the town have wrought upon a young lad too simple to withstand the easiest temptations, too weak to learn a skill, too cowardly in mind to take stock of his own character and come to proper discipline. Your wise Chrobius proposed that we hang him from the scaffold yonder at the far corner of the wall, but I have persuaded him that certain interrogations must first proceed, for we know not what other designs he hath formed nor which confederates might be leagued with him. We shall lead him back to my house, gentlemen, and put questions to him in such manner that he shall plead with tearful eyes and broken bones to be hanged with all dispatch.

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Your good captain has offered a detail of men to guard us homeward and I have gratefully accepted."

With this sentence two men fell into rank on either side of me while Astolfo and a shaggy corporal posted themselves before. Then we were off on a dolorously sluggish march out of the compound while the soldiers rattled their weapons in derision. Through the gates we went, over the road through the fields and into Tardocco. The pace became a little brisker yet was slow enough that early risers — the farmers carting produce to market, the night watch returning sleepily homeward, the ostlers and sweepers and blear-eyed, unsteady revelers in their rounds — had a good long view of the sorry spectacle of dejected Falco trudging through the streets in soiled and bedraggled motley.

When we reached Astolfo's mansion he unlocked the gate to the east garden and led us to the springhouse there under the great hemlock tree. Into that cold, dank space he booted me, wrapped a chain around door-slat and jamb, and secured it with a massive lock.

"There he'll cool his senses, gentlemen, and my manservant will come out shortly to keep guard over him. Meantime, let us go into the house and try what the larder might supply to break our fast. I seem to recall a platter of kidney pies and a small keg of new country oat ale."

They responded to this invitation with ready good cheer and marched off, Astolfo leading them while whistling a merry martial tune. I heard him say, as they departed, "I should not be surprised, gentlemen, if your generous countess and the sage Chrobius do not reward us royally for this morning's labor."

I sat down weakly on the stone ledge of the spring run, where jugs of fresh milk, oilskin packets of cheese and butter, and jars of wine were set to cool. As I was rubbing my tender belly and nursing my throbbing noggin, my eye fell upon a basket of woven willow in the corner by my left boot. I dragged it open to discover a pewter mug, a loaf of black bread, a knuckle of boiled beef, and some table cutlery.

I had understood, from the first moment of Astolfo's appearance, that my attempted burglary was but a staged mummery, a stratagem designed to force attention upon myself and away from some other occurrence, but I could not fathom what it might be. For the time being, I did not care. Despite my knocks and aches, I was perishingly hungry and fell upon the victuals like a gryphon tearing asunder an ox.

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Afterwards, I took thought whether the rough damp stones of this springhouse might serve as a bed. I was much a-weary and though food had restored my spirits a little, my pains did not desist. The little players' scene before the soldiery was but sham, yet Astolfo's blows had been sufficiently genuine.

THE STONES MADE no easy pallet, but they must have afforded some portion of comfort, for I had to be awakened by Mutano's kicking my boot sole. When I opened my eyes I was startled; I knew the dumb man to be of goodly proportion but had become accustomed. Now that I looked up at him as I lay prone he seemed as tall and maybe as solid as an astrologer's tower.

I rose shakily and with much groaning and followed him through the full morning light into the kitchen of the great house. Astolfo was there, seated, according to his wont, on the large butcher block in the center. He swung his legs idly and hailed me as we entered:

"How now, brave Falco? How like you the life of the thief? Is't not a jolly existence, rife with surprise and unlooked-for reward? Have you already determined to follow its ways to riches — or to the gallows?"

If I showed ill temper, his gibing would only sharpen. "When I take up thievery," I said, "I shall make certain that my colleagues are trustworthy and will not betray me at whim."

"Come, lad. Do you truly find me a whimsical man?"

"I must suppose that my embarrassment and painful blows were parts of a design you had in hand. I have no doubt you will name them the necessary parts."

"We had to convince a skeptical guard troop and the canny Chrobius," he replied. "You may be assured that he was watching our playlet from a high window, trying to discover any trace of deception."

I rubbed my rueful ribs tenderly. "He shall have been convinced," I asserted. "And I am curious to know what Mutano brought away with him while all eyes were feasting upon my own wretched plight. When did you cloak me in this stupid ribbon-dress? When I set out in the fore-dawn, methought I wore a shadow of subtle tints and colorations invisible in dawnlight."

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"And so you did," Astolfo explained. "This frock of giblets and flinders, which no sister of mine could ever wear, if ever I had a sister, served as undergarment to the shadow we cast over you at the last. But that shadow possessed some of its rainbow qualities because its genesis was in moisture. 'Twas the shadow of the actor Ortinio standing in mist with the light bright behind him. As you went along, throwing off animal heat from your exertions, and as the morning grew warmer, this mist-shadow dissipated, leaving you all checkered in parti-colored motley."

"I hope you are content with the spectacle I made, for I think it could not have been completer."

"Let us see how content we are to be, for I am curious about the prize myself." He signed to Mutano, who nodded and with a grave smile unlaced a white leather pouch from his belt, fingered open its mouth, and poured into his left palm four small stones. I recognized them as black opals, ominous gems of grim reputation. They are warranted to bring ill fortune to anyone who possesses them.

Astolfo counted them over: "Here is the sphericle; here the mandorla; here the small lozenge; here the larger cartouche." He pointed out each shape as he went, then looked at Mutano. "It is the tiny arrow-leaf opal, then?"

Mutano smiled more widely and from the cuff of his ocher leather sleeve plucked forth another opal, even blacker than the others, which had been cut at one end into a sharpish point.

Astolfo clapped his hands lightly, then rubbed them together. "So our surmise was correct. The piercing form had been chosen, though there is but superstition in the choice and no science."

I began. "I do not — "

"You no longer need to appear so ridiculous," Astolfo said and reached out casually and ripped away my robe of ribbons, crushed it into a ball, and flung it on the flagstone floor. "You will learn more thoroughly without reliving your embarrassment. Let us sip a mug of ale to help wash down the dusty matter of explanation." He dropped lightly to the floor, rummaged three mugs from a cupboard, and poured them foaming from a stout stone jar. He, and then Mutano and I, raised our mugs in salute and tasted the brew. Such an ale would cheer even the glummest hour.

"Do you remember when Chrobius showed us the diamond and the things he said of the countess?"

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"He lauded her generosity," I answered, "but lamented the late infirmity of her mind."

"Good. And do you remember how he termed this infirmity?"

"He said that she began to lack sufficient and proper will-call."

"Yes. *Will-call.* In your wide and profoundly thorough perusal of the writings of sages and mages, have you ever encountered this odd word?"

Something nibbled at the rearward of my memory like a mouse in the corner of a meal bin. "Is there not a school or maybe a cabal of philosophers who have formulated certain notions about the nature of authority, about who should be allowed to rule, and how succession of princes, counts, and other nobility should be arranged and that — that.... " The fusty worm-eaten manuscript treatise began to crumble in my mind-sight.

"Perhaps 'twill aid your recollection to note that this gabble of thinkers is sometimes denominated by their deriders as the Prickalists or Pricktolites."

"The *Masculinists,*" I said. "Yes, they who believe that it is graven by the stars upon the tablets of fate that only men are to bear sway over other men and over women. That, they believe, is the true and proper order of things. Any female who occupies a throne or any seat of power is reenacting some ancient and illicit act of usurpation that has brought the world into its present state of degraded confusion."

"Now you have got it," Astolfo said. "Those who follow this course of thought will not allow that it is legitimate for a woman to rule or to have power over any others, excepting her children, her animals, and her female servants."

"So, if Chrobius subscribes to this way of thinking — "

"He may desire to overthrow any woman in a seat of state. Yet what sort of woman, what exemplar of the female mind, will he distrust, fear, and perhaps envy the most?"

"The woman who is three in one," I said, "the triply endowed, triply powerful woman who is child, beauty, and crone in one." The thought of it fired my enthusiasm so that I drained off my mug and held it out to be replenished.

He pretended to demur. "We are not to the end of this knotty length of string. You had better keep your wits clear to think the pattern through."

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"You are in fee to me for another ale and many another after that," I said, "because of the ugly drubbing you laid upon me at the palace."

He grinned and Mutano poured me full again.

"But I cannot cipher how Mutano's stealing of that small black-opal arrow can hinder the schemes of Chrobius."

"He did not steal; he traded for it," Astolfo said. "You have studied the lore of precious stones. You have read how jewels, and diamonds in particular, partake or share, after being long in their possession, the spirits of their owners."

"Yes. I recalled to you the instance of Erminia, whose jewel crumbled when she died, but you dismissed the tale."

"'Tis worn thin from too much wear, but true enough. I have no quarrel with its kernel. Now you must have read also that the nature of one stone can be transformed by keeping it in proximity with another and that the black opal is an especially debasing companion."

"In Maxilius' *De gemmae et spiriti mundi*, there is a lengthy — "

"Yes, and in Bertralius, Ronio, Militides, and many another. Chrobius had paired the countess's diamond with a pernicious opal while the casket stood nighttimes in her bedchamber. By little and little, it drew one part of her tripartite spirit into the diamond, the opal serving as conduit. In due season, the other sides of her nature would also follow and the diamond itself would cloud to dull gray and finally to black. She herself would be left a husk, without memory, without spark; she would lapse lifeless in her mind, her body deteriorating like a drift of snow melting in the first heats of springtime."

"And Chrobius would then seize her state."

"No, he hath no lineage of blood. The people would not countenance the usurpation. But her third husband, the count with whom he is joined, would return from exile, pretend to care for the countess in her infirmity, and bring all power to himself."

"This diamond found in the sea chest, this legacy of her second husband, has not proved the happy largess she thought it."

"It was no legacy. Chrobius or some accomplice secreted it there to be found."

"But why does Mutano hold not one but five black opals?"

"We did not know the design of the one Chrobius paired with the

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diamond and were forced to resort to surmise, choosing the most favored designs in which that gem is usually cut. Fortune was with us."

"But now Chrobius will see his opal absent, will think upon my stupid burglary attempt and its childish comedy, and know that you — "

"He will not find the opal missing, for Mutano substituted a harmless bit of obsidian in that same shape to lie in the casket by the diamond. It hath no occult powers and in time the countess's spirit shall escape its diamond imprisonment and she shall be three again and whole."

"Yet he shall observe her transformation, her renewal, and know — "

"He will know that we know his scheme and that if he move against her we can reveal all upon him."

"Why not do so at once?"

"Best to watch and wait. Has he confederates in the palace? Has he formed secret alliances with other princes, other provinces or forces? He shall be aware of our gaze and if he does attempt any hidden plan, we shall detect it forthwith."

"So we do nothing for the present."

"We watch and wait. You may improve the time by further study of gems, and Mutano will begin your preparation for exercises in the wearing of shadows, how to don them without causing damage, how to choose the best for the task at hand, how to fit them to your form, how to move in them so that you seem a play of light and dark and not a clown clopping through a murky fog."

"This is a more entertaining exercise than any you have set me to undertake so far," I said. "There may be enjoyment in it."

"As may be," said Astolfo, "yet this too is a discipline requiring rigor. And has Mutano ever disappointed you in the policy of rigor?"

I looked at Mutano's broad smile and did not altogether like the cast of it. "No," I said, "he has not."

We had arranged for the unmasking of Chrobius to take place in three stages in our next and final visitation at the court. The first stage was for me to be brought before the countess in chains and shackles, bearing the marks of ungentle treatment; I was to make confession of my fictitious dastardly crimes and she was to conceive and pronounce sentence.

This bit of prelude was to afford us opportunity to observe the

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countess, to see whether or not we could discover changes in her demeanor, in the movements of her mind, the health of her physic. We were to observe Chrobius also for any hint that he had discovered Astolfo's replacement of his conduit opal with an innocuous shard of obsidian — or for any change about the minister that might betoken danger to the countess or to us.

Our audience with her this time proceeded in the beginning similarly to the first time. We were received, as then, before her imposing, elaborately carved chair in the large salon. Now Mutano was present as guard over me and he found it his part in the acting to cuff me about the jaw from time to time and to give my ankles an occasional contemptuous kick. This part he played with unfeigned relish.

I stood before the countess, Mutano on my right side, Astolfo on the other, and Chrobius off to the left behind us; I mumbled out the rigmarole Astolfo had rehearsed me in: how I had planned to steal the great diamond, keep it secret till I could use it to buy my way into the good graces of the bloody pirate Morbruzzo, then join with him in a campaign of pillage, rapine, and destruction. But now, by means of the shadow master's minute regimen of iron disciplines, I had become a miserable and sniveling penitent and content to live or die in any fashion at the countess's desire.

She spoke to Astolfo. "What think you, sir? Is his penitence genuine or only a further sham with which he hopes to escape the severest sentence?"

He inclined his head, an ambiguous expression on his face. "I believe he is sincere at this moment, in this hour today. But who can read what thought will come tomorrow to such a viper's-knot of a mind?"

"You have him securely in hand?"

"Oh yes, milady. My man Mutano looks to him closely."

At these words, Mutano fetched me such a sharp slap that blood dripped from my nose. This, I thought, was overacting the part. I longed to take his place in our drama; I could devise any number of painful cranks and pinches that would send him reeling, if we but exchanged roles.

"Then I leave final judgment to you, Astolfo," said she. "If he is reformable, well; if not, mayhap the world should be unencumbered of him."

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"Milady."

"Now as to the diamond," she said, "in what condition will you say it stands?"

"It has been polluted by some means or other," Astolfo replied. "You were correct to observe that its shine had somewhat muddied and its brightness occluded. Yet it is such a grand diamond, such a valiant one, that I believe it must possess inherent strong virtue to regenerate itself, to purge the darkness from it."

"That would be a beatific event."

"My advice is, *Bright to bright and never night.* That is, milady, 'twould be best not to shut it away in casket or box or vault, surrounded by black gloom and tomblike silence. Better to bring it to its own likeness and let it breathe there and find itself again. Your own physic may strengthen along with it, milady, for it is well attested in the accounts of history and the writings of sages that the health of the possessors stands in close relation to the condition of the stones they possess. I could furnish many a treatise and pluck from memory countless examples."

He paused and cleared his throat. "Perhaps, if you have time and patience, you might hear the little known story of the lady Erminia and her opal. It so closely was attached to her thoughts and moods that it changed hue and some have said, even its shape, as her own thoughts journeyed and her moods shifted...."

And then Astolfo went on to tell at length, with intriguing detail and in high-colored language, that story of Erminia he would brook no syllable of from my lips. I found this most irritating and might even have preferred another of Mutano's blows to Astolfo's elaborate tale of Erminia. I rattled my chain and Mutano, as if to oblige my unspoken thought, delivered a solid kick to my leg.

Astolfo was concluding: "So, as you see, the connections between possessor and possession are intimate and enduring. For the sake of the stone and for the sake of your own well being, I would pray you to place the diamond upon a sheet of the snowiest linen on a table in an open room, with two lamps set about it day and night to shed on it the warmest and most lucent light. I am certain that you will then see it return to its former brilliance."

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"It may be as you propose," the countess said, "but I mislike exposing my diamond in such a public area, so prominent to the eyes of all, with everyone passing by and about. Why, 'tis to welcome thievery with a handwrit invitation delivered upon a salver."

Her doubtful remark brought us to the third part of Astolfo's scheme.

"It will be broadly approachable, milady. So it must be constantly guarded and its care must be given over to the responsibility of one who is completely, nay, slavishly devoted to your best welfare. It must be guarded by a person whom no taint of suspicion can ever join to, one who has served you faithfully for many a long season, someone you have learned to trust without stint or reservation."

"You intend my minister Chrobius," she said.

"But milady — " Chrobius stepped forward and made as if to remonstrate.

"Our Chrobius hath many a weighty matter already in his charge," the countess said. "There are affairs of state which pluck at his attention like hungry children at their mother's apron. Matters of finance bedevil him, rumors of armed revolt, whispers of intrigue and conflict: Every day his hours are so overfull with such considerations that they spill out of their allotted times like oat grain pouring from a torn sack."

"If't vex not your forbearance, milady, let me plead," Astolfo said, "for I believe there is no charge in all your affairs so urgent as this one. It touches directly upon your health and therefore upon the safety of your lands and dependents. I would urge you to create a special, particular office in this regard. Let your Chrobius become Master of the Jewel. If any stratagem advance against the diamond, he shall find it out, though it be hid like an adder coiled in a cave in the cliffs of Clamorgra."

Chrobius came forward with unexpected quickness for an elderly man. "Milady Countess, I feel I must turn away from this sudden and injudicious honor. There are affairs of — "

The countess giggled merrily and clapped her hands like an excited child. She drummed her heels on the rung of her chair. "*Master of the Jewel!*" she cried. "Oh, that is a dear, a precious title. I do love the ring of it."

"Yet it is a grave responsibility and much hangs upon the office," Astolfo warned. "If anything were to happen to the Great Countess Trinia

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Diamond, as the gemologists now name it, then all the consequence would be on the head of the Master of the Jewel and Chrobius must stand to answer."

"It is grave — but also frolicsome," she said. "It is done. I now declare thee, my good and faithful minister Chrobius, Master of the Jewel. It shall henceforth be your sole duty to guard by night and day, in peace and in war, in foul weather and fair, the welfare of the Great Countess Trinia Diamond. You shall be well rewarded in your service."

Chrobius did not betray himself by so much as the quiver of an eyebrow. "Yes, milady Countess." He bowed and stepped backward into his place behind our trio.

"You too shall be fitly rewarded, Master Astolfo. You have but to name your fee, be it not too burdensome to our treasury."

He made one of his unhurried, elegant bows. "The service was too trifling, milady, and I am still embarrassed by the perfidy of my once-apprentice, this Falco here. I could expect no reward."

"You can. You must."

"If it please you, milady — no. But I shall return every fortnight or so to see if all is in order, that no other gem has been brought to a proximity with the diamond, that it is kept in a bright, bare place all its own, and that no shadow is stealing into its heart like some arrant villain crawling into a secret cave in Clamorgra."

"Well then," she said, "I fear not that I shall find some way to recompense your good effort. And now, as his last duty before he attendeth only to the jewel continually, Chrobius shall lead you the way out."

"Milady." Astolfo bowed once more and we departed, with the wretched, battered, peevish Falco shuffling along in chains and devising in his furious mind many little revenges upon his friend Mutano.

Chrobius proceeded before us through the great salon, through the corridors where the shadows no longer whispered ominous threats, to the wide hall at the front doors of the palace. Here he stopped, turned and gave each of us a level, uninformative gaze, signaled to the footmen to open for us, then turned and padded away to his task of nursemaiding to the end of his days that immense diamond.

Outside, we climbed into the carriage provided by the countess and set off toward Astolfo's mansion. I sat in the corner of the vehicle, weary

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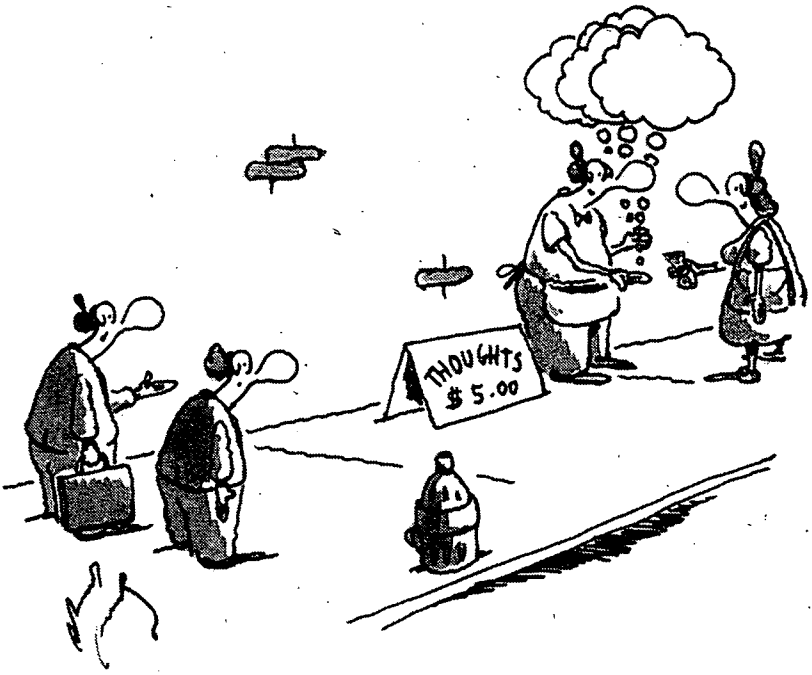
and resentful, yet pleased withal. Master and manservant sat across from me in high good humor.

"A stout piece of work, methinks," said Astolfo. "We need no gold in our pouch for this work: We stand to flourish in the countess's favor and gratitudinous good will. We have the treacherous Chrobius in our power. Is't not a happy day's labor, Falco? And none so onerous, either."

"Easier," I said, "much easier for you than for me." I clashed together my shackles.

Astolfo and Mutano grinned at each other. "Ah, lad," said the shadow master, "when I consider how far you are from a proper attainment, how much you have yet to learn, there swims into my brain a vision of the wide and starry sky." ☞



"I wasn't that impressed until I found out his initial investment was only a penny per unit."

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James Stoddard published "The Star Watch" in our Jan. 2002 issue and "The Battle of York" in our All-American July 2004 issue. He lives in Texas and recently welcomed a grandson into the family. This story is in part a tribute to two of Mr. Stoddard's former students, both of whom work for NASA as A/V technicians.

The Star to Every Wandering Barque

By James Stoddard

THE AGE OF CONSCIENCE arrived on a Thursday evening in June, as Greg Stoll sat in the twilight on his front porch in a suburb of Houston. His house overlooked a small lake, and after work he liked to rest in his porch swing and watch the trees cast their long shadows across the water. Sometimes his wife, Michelle, sat with him, but on this particular evening he was alone, the swing gently creaking.

The shards of the day remained with him, the myriad noises of the broadcast booth at NASA, where Greg worked as a video and audio supervisor, handling everything from interviews to launches to public relations spots. He had been hired in time to witness the original shuttle launch firsthand, and had been there ever since. It was a good job, easy in some ways, fun in others, but the last decade had been difficult. Budget cuts, personnel changes, mission failures, faltering morale; sometimes it was hard to remain optimistic. Though his was a support position, he loved NASA. But the politics could be overwhelming; in his position, he saw too much of it. The organization could do so much more if only

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everyone could forget their personal agendas, stick to the task, and just get along.

As the sun fell below the horizon and the first stars came out, he remembered the taped interviews he had done with the crew of the ill-fated *Columbia*. He could still recall their bright, hopeful faces, their quick wit and ready smiles, some arrogant, some humble, all confident. It had been the same before the *Challenger* accident. He stared at the clouds, orange and pink with the setting sun — especially lovely that evening — and sorrowed for all those brave souls, gone forever from the earth.

Even as he watched the gathering gloom, his own thoughts desolate, something inside him abruptly *lifted*. A weight seemed to rise from the center of his chest. He gasped, the breath pouring immeasurably sweet into his lungs. Forever after, he would associate the sensation with the beauty of the clouds.

In that moment, he *understood*, though several days would pass before he could totally comprehend his understanding. A great oppression had departed from him, one he had carried unknowing all his life. He understood.

All the pain borne of his fifty-odd years, the misunderstandings, hurt feelings, slights, griefs, disappointments, the little agonies of living, fell from him. A tremendous sense of forgiveness overwhelmed him, for himself and for others. A love for everyone and everything suffused him, the kind of love he must have had as a small child. He felt abruptly whole.

The experience came with rocket speed, a hundred thoughts and sensations pouring through him. Before he even recognized what he was doing, he found himself weeping in the porch swing overlooking the little lake, gasping sobs, crying as he had not cried since he was ten years old.

Eventually, he fell silent, and a part of him recognized that his brain no longer rattled away as it had done for so many years, chugging along like a broken steam engine fueled by a thousand useless, random thoughts. The silence of a sanctuary, of a cathedral. The silence of peace.

Night fell, a glorious night, the darkening of the sky, the shifting of the shades, the beating of the stars seen through the haze of the street lights. He had always appreciated a good night sky, yet this time was different. Now, he truly saw its splendor.

At last, when the songs of the cicadas filled the air, he staggered to his

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feet. He had to tell his wife what had happened. He had to tell everyone!

Turning to his front door, he found all the lights in the house extinguished, as if no one had bothered to turn them on. He hurried inside, calling several times before finding his wife upstairs, seated in a wooden chair, looking out the window.

She turned to him, her face lit by the dull glow of the street lamps. She had always been beautiful; now she looked holy, her eyes twin lamps, radiant with love. In wonder, he realized he must look the same.

"Why didn't I ever see how incredible life is?" she asked.

He took her in his arms, rejoicing.

Out of a lifetime of habit, they turned on the TV to see if they were the only ones. Mindless entertainments played, stories without meaning. Most of the news stations were off the air. One had a camera rolling on a news desk empty except for a woman sitting and smiling at her hands, half her face outside the range of the lens.

Greg and Michelle went outside, intending to knock on their neighbors' doors, but people were already in the street, talking in soft, excited voices. When the couple joined the crowd, everyone greeted them with a hug. Introductions were made all around, as if this were the first time they had met their neighbors; despite having lived there many years, this was mostly true. People laughed and cried, but despite the festive air, Greg noticed how little anyone said, how little *he* said. There was too much going on in his mind.

In their excitement, Greg and his wife stayed up late that night, falling asleep curled up together as they had when they were young.

The next morning no one went to work. The world, as one, began a day of reflection. Greg spent the morning with Michelle.

"I never appreciated you enough," they told one another. They spoke of their early life together, the good and bad, and for the first time, looking at his wife, Greg truly understood what Yeats meant when he wrote *But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, and loved the sorrows of your changing face.*

"Is it a dream?" Michelle asked. "Will we wake up tomorrow and be the way we were before? So...limited?"

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"It's not that I feel any smarter," Greg told her. "But I understand more. My thinking before was so...disturbed. The things I worried about. It was all so...so — "

"Evil," Michelle said.

The word hung in the air between them.

"An old, unused term," Greg said. "Out of date, I would have called it before. Never would have applied it to myself. I mean, I thought I was basically a good person. But there was so much selfishness, so many times when I was petty or cruel."

He called his daughter in California later that day.

"I'm sorry I wasn't a better father," he said.

"I'm sorry I wasn't a better daughter," she said.

"It's all right," they both said together. They laughed and fell silent.

"It's like everything I ever blamed you for is gone," she finally said. "Not that you were a bad dad or anything, but now I understand you did the best you could, for what we were then."

They talked about moving closer, so they could see each other more often.

Afterward, Greg had a similar conversation with his son in Wisconsin.

Throughout the day, by mutual consent, every television station remained off the air until six o'clock that evening when the President gave a message. For the first time in years, every station carried it; for the first time in decades, everyone considered the business of the nation more important than The Home Shopping Network and reruns of *Gilligan's Island*. Nor was it the same beleaguered man who had faced the cameras dozens of times before. His usually penetrating eyes were calm; his face relaxed. He didn't read a speech; he just talked.

"Something has happened," his smooth, warm voice said. "Something wonderful. A New Reasoning. We don't know how or why, and it will take time to understand the ramifications. There is much to be done. This is a new beginning. A great work lies before us. We will do it together. All of us. A world of us.

"I have been duplicitous; I will be duplicitous no more. I have been arrogant; I will be arrogant no more. I have catered to private interests for the sake of personal power. From now on, I will put the good of the country ahead of my own concerns.

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"There is one thing you should know," he ended. "Not a single weapon has been fired anywhere in the world since yesterday evening."

EVEN THOUGH he had the day off, Greg went to work on Saturday. He had a lot of ideas he wanted to share. When he arrived, he discovered nearly the entire staff had done the same. A big meeting was held and Greg's video crew recorded it for posterity.

Abe Feinstein, the Director of NASA, addressed the audience.

"Given the week's changes, I think there are three questions we should ask. Number one: Is our work important, or should we petition Congress to eliminate NASA? Two: If our work *is* important, have we been pursuing it in the best manner? Three: If not, how should we change? I want us to break into small groups, each no larger than ten, and discuss these questions."

With his crew's hand-cams rolling, Greg walked among the participants, listening to them talk. Some were fellow workers he had once disliked; one was a woman he had loathed. Now, he wondered how he could have ever felt that way. It seemed so unreasonable.

"Greg," a man told him, pointing to a chair. "You should be in on this. Join our group."

No one had ever asked Greg's opinion on the direction of NASA before, but he had ideas and took a seat.

Everyone in the group spoke softly, taking turns, considerate of one another. Though many were passionate, no voices were raised, despite differing opinions. Gone were the needs for attention, the rivalries, the childishness. People said what they meant. No offense was given; none taken.

They quickly agreed that the exploration of space *was* important. Curiosity, rather than being dulled by the New Reasoning, had been intensified. The old, child-like sense of wonder permeated the discussions, the thirst to see the marvels of the universe. It was decided that NASA must be managed in a new way, with greater freedom for input in all areas. Simple logic dictated the necessity to ask for increased funding.

Greg drove home that night whistling.

* * *

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On Monday morning, several important announcements were made. The Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan dissolved the organization. Forty-seven terrorist groups renounced violence. People who had committed crimes began turning themselves in to authorities, overwhelming the resources of the penal system. Four major hotel chains agreed to house the overflow for free until the courts could determine whether incarceration remained a social necessity.

China recognized Taiwan as an independent nation. Israel and Palestine began serious peace talks. South American and Middle Eastern countries vowed to plow up their poppy fields.

Major magazine publishers met with advertisers to determine whether the content of their periodicals was truly meaningful, resulting in a suspension of more than seventy-five percent of their offerings and a revamping of the remainder.

With the drive for self-promotion extinguished, producers, directors, and actors walked away from movies made purely for profit. The studios agreed and tore up their contracts.

The pharmaceutical, insurance, and healthcare industries began a series of talks with the World Health Organization, to discuss providing a standard of care for every citizen on Earth.

Thousands of companies announced a restructuring of remuneration policies to provide more equitable salaries to their employees. Hundreds of CEOs voluntarily returned the bulk of their benefits.

Bookstores noted a marked increase in the sale of poetry.

A phrase appeared that would become the slogan of the world: *Do no harm to others or yourself.*

On Tuesday, Greg realized the importance of silence. He had filled his life with the constant yammering of TV, movies, satellite radio, CDs, books on tape — anything to keep from thinking. Now he basked in the solitudes. No longer did he spend his time regretting the past or brooding over the future. The present surrounded him. He could finally appreciate happy moments without analyzing his own appreciation, without comparing it to the happy times of his childhood.

To sit in a car and meditate became a joy. He drove slower, no longer in a hurry. So did everyone else, and the speed limit found its natural

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equilibrium at forty-five miles per hour on the freeway and twenty in the city. With the highways less dangerous, Greg contemplated riding a bicycle to work.

On his way home that evening, he realized that though death and disease remained upon the Earth, he no longer feared either one. How strange that he ever had.

The news that evening announced that every country in the Middle East had agreed to the joint Israeli/Palestinian peace plan. The United Nations voted unanimously to adopt democratic reforms and to abolish trade sanctions worldwide. Ending hunger by the end of the year became *the* international priority. A list was made of the key points of the treaties and resolutions, but no papers were signed. A country's word had become its bond.

In India, the people voted to eliminate the caste system.

The lotteries closed after giving away their last few millions to people who donated the money to the food relief effort.

Across the world, street people and those placed in institutions because of mental rather than physical causes awoke to sanity. Millions of alcoholics and drug addicts turned themselves in to treatment centers.

By the second week, all weapons of war were abolished.

Ben Thomas, Greg and Michelle's next-door neighbor, appeared at their door at five that evening.

"Greg, we're having a block party tonight, to celebrate. You coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Greg replied.

By seven o'clock, everyone in the neighborhood was in the streets. This was a different kind of party, a different type of revelry — quiet, joyous. Greg discovered he no longer needed a couple of beers to feel comfortable in a crowd. He could be himself. He said things that were meaningful, encouraging, or playful. He listened when others spoke. No one talked about the weather just for something to say.

He noticed that people laughed more than they used to, but told fewer jokes. Humor itself had changed. The ironic or sarcastic didn't seem funny anymore. The idea of making light of others seemed ludicrous.

Earlier that week, with safety no longer an issue and energy conservation a priority, the city council had voted to discontinue using street

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lights. As twilight fell, everyone in the neighborhood sat in lawn chairs or on blankets in front of Ben Thomas's place, to watch an event many hadn't witnessed in over twenty years, a tableau some had *never* seen.

They watched the stars come out.

One by one, the tiny, enormous suns appeared, and the children *ooohed* and *ahhhed* as if they watched fireworks.

"There's one!" a little girl shouted.

"I see another," a little boy cried.

"Awesome!" a teenager said.

"Daddy," another boy said, "tell me about the constellations."

But no one knew the names of the constellations except Greg, so he pointed them out, one by one: the North Star, the Big and Little Dippers, the Teapot, Scorpio, the Swan, Hercules, the tiny Pleiades. He showed them the Milky Way and the planets; he told them the distances, and his listeners — who had never cared before — sat riveted by the telling.

When he was done, Greg and his neighbors lit candles and stood in a circle, looking up at the millions of stars, the great wheel passing overhead.

We shall overcome, they sang. *We shall overcome someday.*

A time popularly called *The Big Reshuffle* began. With the Criminal Code abolished and everyone rethinking their lives, hundreds of job categories either changed or ceased to exist. Psychiatrists, prostitutes, professional models, district attorneys, security guards — thousands had to find other work. The word *policeman* was changed to *helper*. Most lawyers lost their clientele.

Droves of people quit their jobs to find meaningful work, many moving from management to service industries — plumbers, electricians, carpenters. The Peace Corps and several other charity organizations soon had more volunteers than they could use.

The economic restructuring was difficult at first, but many of those whose jobs had become obsolete joined either the World Hunger Organization or the World Housing Authority.

"TV doesn't interest me much anymore," Michelle said.

"They're coming out with new programming," Greg replied. "I read about it in the paper. Speculative series about what we might accomplish.

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History and Natural History. Game shows without prizes. Puzzle shows. And the camera shots are going to be a lot slower."

WITH NO CONCERNS of bribery, blockades, or kickbacks, the World Hunger Organization, powered by farmers' wheat donations from Kansas to the Ukraine, soon announced it had enough distribution centers in place to feed the world.

Millions volunteered to give twenty percent of their income for the construction of basic housing. The standard of living in the developed countries dropped slightly, as its citizens rid themselves of things they had once considered necessities, the status symbols of neighborhood and nation.

The automobile and petroleum industries retooled. Radical engine designs, uncovered in corporate vaults, were put into production. The car, no longer a symbol of prestige, became both more functional and more beautiful. The popularity of public transportation soared. With profits a secondary concern, measures were taken to protect the environment. A plan was implemented to end strip mining within three years.

Socialism resurfaced, a system too idealistic for a selfish people. The European Union decided that people were responsible enough to use only the supplies, food, and clothing they needed, and to work to support the public good with no thought of income. A referendum was passed to abolish currency. Within two months, the other nations followed suit, and the strange, abstract system of monetary compensation that had ruled the world for so long was finally laid to rest. A short ceremony was held as the New York Stock Exchange closed for the final time.

At NASA, Greg began to see big changes. The world's resources, no longer required to wage war, were turned to research and public works. Materials poured into the space agency; countries shared knowledge indiscriminately.

More importantly, people's minds were finally free. Greg no longer wasted time on company politics and personal animosities. The joy of his career filled him, the *play* of handling the NASA broadcasts. Mistakes

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were made, but easily forgiven, both by his bosses and his own conscience. There were no misgivings. Projects proceeded at astonishing speed.

Given full range of their imaginations, NASA dreamed big. In an astounding breakthrough, a group of physicists in Zurich discovered a method to overcome Einstein's limits on space travel. The problems that had baffled scientists for half a century were suddenly solved — ships's weight, shielding, propulsion, the health of the crew. Plans were drawn to build an interstellar craft.

Across the world, the AIDS epidemic began to abate, as concern for others overcame all other considerations. New vaccines appeared. Unwanted pregnancies dropped to zero, reason finally overcoming the drive for procreation. To reduce overpopulation, everyone agreed that couples should have no more than two children. Families that wanted more children adopted from the dwindling numbers in orphanages.

The pace of life slowed, yet more was accomplished. Through no edict, the work day gradually diminished to six hours, with a one hour lunch. More people began to garden.

On the second anniversary of the New Reasoning, millions gathered in New York City, at the site of the Memorial Museum erected to commemorate the destruction of the World Trade Center. Former members of terrorist organizations were in attendance. The centerpiece of the ceremony was the bronze sculpture entitled *The Sphere*, which had survived the September 11 attack. A new band was added to the piece, with the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. inscribed upon it.

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!

In the fifth year of the New Reasoning, Greg sat at the mixing console at the broadcast facility at NASA, watching a sleek, white ship preparing to launch. The unmanned test flights had gone well. He smiled. This was to be a *short* flight to Proxima Centauri, the closest star. How he would have laughed if anyone had called it that five years before.

He had spent the last month taping interviews of the seven person crew, another group of bright, hopeful astronauts about to take the trip of a lifetime. He thought again of the recordings of the Challenger and

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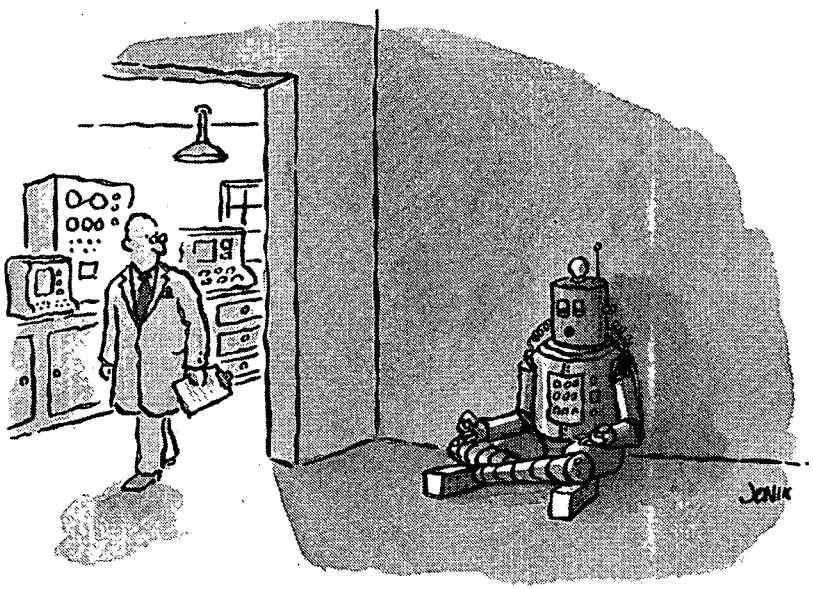
Columbia crews. Once, such memories would have evoked only sorrow. But not today. Death was part of life; the sacrifices had not been in vain. No sacrifices were ever in vain.

The countdown began. No one was nervous; no one afraid. Fear was in the past. As the numbers rolled down and the engines began their roar, Greg adjusted the volume on his monitor feed, smiling down at the faders.

"*Now*," he whispered, "*we're ready*."



"...ohm..."

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These facts are known: *When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Mr. Cowdrey had already evacuated safely to a town in western Mississippi. A longtime resident of the Crescent City, Mr. Cowdrey had plenty of past experience with hurricanes and always had an emergency plan. (In fact, his previous hurricane story, "Grey Star," appeared in our Jan. 2003 issue and is currently reprinted on our Website.)*

Here's the speculation: *After Katrina, when Mr. Cowdrey returned to his home near Tulane, he found that his muse had moved in. How else to explain the string of stories we've received over the past two years?*

The Recreation Room

By Albert E. Cowdrey

SWEATING, JIM GUEST TREKKED along the street where he'd spent most of his life. All the way, he marveled that it could be so absolutely empty.

The lawns were dead, the magnolias dying. White dust covered the brown leaves, and a dry pungent reek almost like burning sulfur set him coughing. In the distance he could hear men's voices, a hound's mournful baying, but here on Lark Street the vacant bungalows stood silent. Power lines hung like Christmas festoons, poles interlaced like jackstraws. A clapboard garage had floated into the roadway and lay becalmed, like an ark that had failed.

The sky was a blue steel bowl, the sun blinding. With every movement an effort, Jim seemed to breast a tide of molten wax.

Just beyond the garage, No. 488 came into view. Well, it was still there, not looking abandoned so much as never lived in. The big pines he'd planted as seedlings had all blown down, but they'd fallen away from the house instead of crushing it. Next door, Dr. Dreyfus's house had been

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impaled by a boat, a pricey SeaCraft with twin outboards now suspended in midair. Both houses bore the watermark, what people were calling the bathtub ring, almost at the level of the eaves.

He hated the thought of going inside 488, seeing what had happened there — especially if Madame Lott's prophecy turned out to be right and the dead awaited him. Yet he'd come a long way, and couldn't turn back now.

Back before Katrina — everything these days was reckoned BK or AK, as it had once been antebellum or postbellum — back in those distant times, Madame Lott had been Jim's private oracle, consulted with a mixture of faith and irony.

As a scientist — before retirement he'd taught biology at the university — of course he knew it was all nonsense. Consulting her had been a gag at first, like sitting down with one of the Tarot readers who infested the sidewalks around Jackson Square. And a gag it seemed (who was the "mystery woman with flame-colored hair" whose fate was entwined with his own?) until Madame Lott remarked that if he drank less coffee, he'd get rid of his "migrant headaches."

How the devil did she know he had migraines? (And, by the way, the prescription worked.)

That first visit to her Royal Street "studio" on an idle Saturday morning twenty-two years ago had set the pattern. She'd opened a narrow doorway to another realm in Jim's careful, fact-obsessed life. Sure, she faked a lot, that went with the Reader and Advisor game — intuition didn't come at anybody's beck and call. Yet from time to time insights emerged from her purple-glossed lips that were hard to explain. About his father, for instance — the revelation that finally had convinced him there was more to her than turbans and twaddle.

"I see a man with white hair," Madame Lott had intoned. "Somebody close to you, somebody you love. He's facing a storm. I see the flash and I hear the thunder."

Only Jim's father qualified in the white-haired and close department. He was a cool, dim, abstract man, a bookkeeper whose frustrated yearnings for science had helped nudge Jim into the field. He'd never really thought about loving his father until two weeks later, when he astonished

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himself by breaking down after learning that the old man, for reasons never made clear, had shot himself.

Then there was the case of Dot, Jim's wife. One day in 1997 the seeress had announced, "The woman in your bed, she carrying a dangerous baby in her womb, a baby she won't be able to get rid of."

Since 55-year-old Dot was in no danger of contracting motherhood, he'd ignored this bit of fantasy until she was diagnosed with disseminated and inoperable cancer that had originated in her cervix. After her death left him stunned, dry-eyed, a man suddenly adrift and alone in a universe without meaning, he'd asked Madame Lott to tell him about heaven and hell and God and all that.

"Heaven and hell," she'd said, "is something you makes up. Your hell is *your* hell. Your heaven is *your* heaven. Sometimes you wills 'em without even knowing it."

"What about God?"

"Nobody knows him, whatever they say, so don't you try. Go read your Book of Job. It's all in there. And watch out for false comforters, the ones who deny that life is hard. Only death is easy."

Why in the world did that make him feel better — hearing that God was unknowable, death was easy, and he made his own heaven and hell? Yet that night, as if weary of his private Hades, he wept and slept, and next day began a slow recovery from his grief.

Since her days of glory, when she'd been all three Fates rolled into one, Madame Lott had definitely gone down in the world. By the last time he'd seen her, the week before the storm, Royal Street was a fading memory — like other marginal businesses, Madame Lott had been driven out by soaring French Quarter rents. Now she handed out advice on love, death, and (ironically) money in a large dingy room, formerly an agency specializing in cut-rate travel, in a strip mall on Airline Drive. Her neighbors were a remainder outlet, a karate school, a ratty Chinese restaurant, and several boarded-up storefronts. What had been the show window was swathed in muslin drapes that created a dusty gloom.

In the noontime shadows, her fat fingers had rested lightly on the backs of his pale bony hands, occasionally stroking the hairs like the strings of a zither. She wasn't a palmist — she'd explained that many times; she touched his hands to (why else?) sense his aura. That day he'd

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figured his aura must be cloudy, because she hit him right off with a truly startling pronouncement: "There be dead folks in your attic."

After a moment to get over his shock, he told her, "I finished the attic years ago. Turned it into a rec room. I spend a lot of time up there. No corpses anywhere — I'd have noticed."

He'd felt sorry for her, overflowing her iron folding chair and handing out fake insights. When he first met her, she'd been a handsome *café-au-lait* woman, and her robes and turbans had made her look imposing instead of merely hokey. Now she was just one more American behemoth, her huge sagging bosom overhanging the card table like an avalanche waiting to happen. On the wall, dim in the shadows, hung decaying travel posters for Aruba and Curaçao and framed photos of two solemn brown babies — grandchildren, Jim supposed. He indulged a brief fantasy of Madame Lott at home, stringing up one of her bras like a hammock and rocking both children to sleep in the giant cups.

And she wasn't improving her reputation by filling his attic with imaginary corpses. When he told her she was wrong, the woman-mountain stirred uneasily and muttered, "Well, maybe there *used* to be some dead folks up there."

Oh fine, he thought. A new tense — the Past Prophetic. "I've lived in the house off and on since it was built," he pointed out. "I grew up there. There's *never* been a corpse in the attic."

She sighed deeply and tried a new line. "Maybe they'll be dying, not dead. I hear somebody gasping for breath. And now they be quiet, so quiet."

"So this happens in the future? That doesn't tell me much. The future's even longer than the past."

"Oh no, Mr. Jim," she said, suddenly decisive and firm. "The future ain't long. It ain't long at all." And in that, as it turned out, she'd been dead right.

On a sulfurous August day, the last day he'd seen or ever would see Lark Street as it was supposed to be, clothed in a hundred shades of green and heavy with summer scents, Jim had clipped his privet hedge and brooded about life's monotony.

Snick, snick, snick. Keep everything level. Right. Nothing ever happens in New Orleans. Dull goddamn town. Snick, snick, snick.

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Life had been tedious since Dot's passing had left him alone. He was not an exciting man ("dependable," people said, "conscientious," "sensible," "means well" — in brief, a bore). Well, his trade had been teaching science to undergraduates; he wasn't *supposed* to be lively. Back when he was a student himself, he'd dated and thought cautiously about marrying a girl named Gwen — only he thought about it so long that she married somebody else, moved to a town upstate, and for twenty years they communicated only by Christmas cards. In time he'd relapsed into a not-too-uncomfortable bachelorhood, expecting to live and die that way, perennially alone and boring.

He still shook his head when he remembered the day the Dean had sent Dot to straighten out the Biology Department's finances. (Like Jim himself, the Accounts Payable had been scrupulously honest but muddled.) She was slender, with suspiciously red hair and a quick, sardonic wit, in spite of which she managed to set his budget right without making him feel like an idiot.

Afterward they began meeting for coffee in the student center. He could hardly believe she liked him. But she'd just escaped from an abusive husband and wanted a gentleman the second time around. She seemed to like his somewhat gaunt good looks, old-fashioned courtesy and quiet smile. After a brief courtship they married, and his life had never been the same.

When Papa shot himself, Jim had moved back into the house in Lakeside, by then an aging subdivision of shade trees, deep greensward, and bird-named cul-de-sacs ending in small circles. He never even thought of selling it; he'd grown up there, learned to swim and paddle a pirogue on the Seventeenth Street canal, played inept but enthusiastic baseball in Lark Street, which had always been kid-friendly and almost without autos. The anonymous interior of the house reflected its occupation by two isolated men in succession. The only emotional focus was an oil portrait of his mother, who'd died when he was three and existed only as a lady with wide-spaced gray eyes and a surprised expression, imprisoned eternally under glittering varnish in a gold-leaf frame over the blond and sootless fireplace.

Under Dot the picture stayed, but the house changed. She'd done poorly out of her first marriage but well out of her divorce, so she quit her

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job and they lived on his salary and spent the income from her shrewdly invested community property on improvements to their lifestyle.

He'd never been to an auction sale, but for two or three years they went every few months, buying handsome, solid furniture that Dot refinished in her spare time. Without obvious nagging, she somehow inspired him to turn the dusty attic into a rec room that became their favorite relaxing spot. Here they took it easy in elderly but still comfortable chairs, whacked a ball around a pocket billiard table if they felt athletic, otherwise read mysteries and drank their evening wine. Through a casement window they looked down at Lakeside — once part of the *cyprière*, the great cypress swamp that had absorbed the river's overflows for millennia — now, dried out by pumps and canals, an extended pine-and-magnolia grove where thousands of red-tile or gray-slate roofs nestled among the trees.

Dot bought a genuine 1950s jukebox with a pile of authentic 45-rpm vinyl records and a diamond-needle Cobra tone arm, so they could listen to the music of their teen years — early Elvis from the days of "Heartbreak Hotel," mid-course Sinatra, platters of the Platters, Al Hibbler quavering out "Unchained Melody" and Satchmo growling "Mack the Knife." While he listened, Jim worked at an old desk — his ambition was to write a book called "Vanished Worlds" on extinct New World species like the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and Florida wolf — while Dot relaxed with bright heaps of seed catalogues and, increasingly, travel brochures.

She became uncannily adept at squeezing the lowest rates out of airlines, finding comfortable hotels at off-season prices, saving and exploiting bonus miles. Protesting mildly all the way, Jim let her drag him to Moscow and Macchu Picchu, Shanghai and Siena. How'd she locate that villa in Tuscany, find an affordable bug-free room for the *Carnivale* in Venice two days before it began, persuade the Capuchin monks to open their boniest and most fascinating Roman grotto for the Guests, though at the time it was closed to the public? Somehow. She was Miss Sweet Persuasion, never obviously pushing yet nearly always getting her way. When she died, all his life's adventure went with her.

Now he hardly ever left Lakeside except during Mardi Gras, when he fled the crowds to an upriver town called Bonaparte where his old

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girlfriend Gwen greeted him gladly. She'd lost her husband, started a business to fill the gap, and wore a groove to Baton Rouge airport, jetting off to foist educational materials on school boards throughout the English-speaking world. A little of her dynamism woke him up, a lot tired him; Gwen found his inertia first restful, then hypnotic. Come to think of it, things had been much the same back when they were dating. Now as then, they enjoyed each other best in small doses.

Otherwise, he relaxed into a life built around habitual tasks and memorabilia. His house was his private museum. His mother's portrait held its old place of honor, and silver-framed photos of Dot against a dozen exotic backgrounds crowded a marble mantelpiece she'd salvaged from a defunct mansion. Exotic figures found homes in this nook and that cranny — shadow puppets from Java, plague-doctor masks from Venice, a Ch'ing statue of the Goddess of Mercy in fading reds and greens.

Here he dreamed away his days, usually content though sometimes weary of the sameness of existence. Indeed, of existence itself. In dark moments he wondered how long death would take to find him. He asked Madame Lott, and her answer had been worthy of the Pythoness at Delphi. "Death will come for you too soon," she intoned, "and too late."

"And what," he snapped, "is *that* supposed to mean?"

She gave him an odd sort of smile. She'd had some dental work, and one of her incisors was now encased in gold, with a star-shaped porthole through which the tooth gleamed whitely.

"It's always too soon to pass," she explained. "Just ask anybody. And also too late, because death don't never come in time to save you from sorrow." Hard to argue with that now.

JIM HEARD about Hurricane Katrina on the news, but paid no attention to it until Gwen called. A storm snob, he quietly scorned nervous Nellies, convinced that anything could be ridden out if he ran the bathtub full of water and laid in an ample supply of sardines and bread. Hadn't he survived three big ones and a dozen little ones in the course of his life?

But Gwen was worried, and called from Bonaparte to tell him so. "I don't like the way it's waltzing around the Gulf," she said. "You know it's picking up energy all the time. Come on up, Jim. Beat the crowd. Besides,

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I want to see you," she added. "It's too damn prim around here, with no smelly old man in the house."

He spent another five minutes grumbling, just to make her realize he was doing it for her, not because he was scared of some damned storm. Then he packed a few clothes, and went outside to close the storm shutters. He waved languidly to his neighbors, who seemed as casual as he. Dr. Dreyfus was parking his Lexus. A lesbian couple — Jean and Carol, was it? — who lived on the other side were walking their pugs, Bunch and Bundle. In the yard that backed on his, the Campbells' kids were enjoying their new pool as noisily as usual.

He considered, then decided against emptying his fridge. How long would he be gone, after all? He tossed his suitcase into the trunk of his car and took off.

It was Saturday, August 27, 2005, a day in the doldrums, windless and searing. The last storm coordinates he noted before turning off and unplugging his TV made him uneasy — Katrina had finally made up her mind and was taking dead aim at New Orleans. A Cat 3, she was as big as Hurricane Betsy had been, back in 1965 — the strongest storm he'd ever lived through. He wanted to ask Madame Lott about Katrina, and drove twenty miles up the Airline before cutting over to I-10. But her studio was closed and locked, so he slid *Ella Sings Cole Porter* into his car's CD player, turned up the air conditioning, and headed without undue haste northward toward the land of loess bluffs and kudzu infestations.

Three hours later he was drinking iced tea on the long curving porch of Gwen's neat, elderly house among the walled gardens and wisteria of Bonaparte's Old Town. She smiled at him, a big busty woman with close-cropped gray hair and a formidable Armenian nose (her maiden name had been Sarkosian). "It takes a hurricane to make you come see me," she complained, as if it were all his fault.

Then she launched her conversational surfboard on a tide of gossip about the town that she, like the natives, called Bony Part. Who was sleeping with whom. Who was sleeping with what. Juicy little scandals from a juicy little town. Some teenage kids of local bigwigs had been caught buck nekkid in a Sweet Dreams Motel with Mazola for lubrication and Ecstasy for, well, ecstasy. Jim smiled tolerantly and succumbed to a

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summer trance, sipping the cold tea and enjoying the hum of her voice as if he were napping near a beehive.

He became aware that Gwen had fallen silent. "You haven't heard a word I said," she accused him.

"Not true. I heard everything."

"Meaning you heard but you didn't listen. In your own world as usual, dammit. What are you thinking about now?"

"Fried catfish. Good old *Ictalurus furcatus*. That joint down on the river still open? I won't be here long, so let's make the most of it."

They spent the next couple of hours eating good fish and drinking bad wine, gossiping and gazing through tinted windows at the curving Mississippi, a vast brown anaconda with countless glittering scales now touched by the setting sun. Small tugs muscled enormous barge trains upstream against the current, and flights of small birds flashed low over the water. Above the bar a TV blared sports bulletins about local teams and updates on the hurricane nearing New Orleans. They asked a waitress to turn it down, for despite the casualness of their talk, something seemed to be happening between them — something both old and new.

That night Gwen assigned him to her guest room. Then changed her mind, and just about the time he was getting sleepy, knocked at his door and joined him in bed. Nothing but snuggling happened then, but he woke before dawn ready for action and feeling strongly that he'd better not waste his opportunity. He tickled her awake and found her agreeable. So they became lovers again, after a lapse of forty years, on the solid adult grounds of long affection and close proximity.

After his unaccustomed exertion that Sunday morning, Jim went back to sleep and slept long and woke late.

At first he didn't know where he was. A pink sky hovered over him, yet a bedside clock said ten-twenty. Okay, the sky was actually a pink tester, and a roseate symphony of swags, ruffles, and other femstuff surrounded and enveloped him. Soft-spoken Dot hadn't cared for furbelows, but pushy, domineering Gwen doted on them.

Speaking of Gwen, her side of the bed was not only empty but cool. Between the double hillocks raised by his feet, Jim next contemplated a TV gazing blankly at him from a marble-topped table. He felt pretty blank

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himself, knowing there was something he needed to check up on, but for several minutes unable to remember what it was. *Oh yeah, Katrina.*

He fumbled at the bedside table, found the remote and turned the set on. The first thing he saw was a satellite image of the Gulf and the two-bladed red symbol of the hurricane, now labeled Category 5. The image was suddenly replaced by the city's mayor, a milk-chocolate gent with waxed and gleaming head, ordering a mandatory evacuation.

Jim pulled pillows randomly behind his back to prop himself up. The damn thing was a *five*. Of course it'd weaken when it hit the continental shelf — they almost always did — but back home it'd be Betsy all over again. Roof tiles would go flying, trees would fall, the lines would go down, the power would fail. The city might take weeks to recover. Thank God his house was sound and strong, a proven veteran of many storms.

Goddamn, he thought, *I wish I'd emptied that fridge.* Had he brought enough clean clothes? Would he have to sample Napoleonic fashions at Wal-Mart?

He stumbled into the bathroom, not even bothering to grimace over the pink toilet cozy, the pink tiles, the shower curtain decorated with pink bunnies and duckies. Heading down to breakfast, he found Gwen in the kitchen, the room where she actually spent her days, kissed her good-morning, and got a smile and a moderately bawdy wink in return. Her maid Olivia, an ebony woman of middle age who worked two hours on Sunday morning, cooked him an enormous breakfast of ham and eggs and biscuits and everything he wasn't supposed to eat, and Jim pigged out because, after all, he needed to keep his strength up in these trying times.

When Olivia departed to make the beds — *beds* because Gwen had rumpled her own, to preserve appearances — she commandeered him for church and they set forth in her Audi. Bonaparte's Protestants worshipped in marble Greco-Roman temples, and so, paradoxically, did its handful of Jews. The priest (genus *Episcopalianus*) gave a fluent sermon on the Kingdom of Heaven, which unlike the kingdoms of the Earth operated on the pure generosity of a God whose essence was love. Then he offered a brief prayer for the people of the Gulf Coast, so soon to feel the wrath of Nature, whose ways for some reason did not mirror those of its Creator.

Jim enjoyed the rest of the day, mainly because he wasn't on the road.

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From time to time Gwen turned on a wall-mounted flat-screen TV that was one of the newest gadgets in her all-purpose kitchen, and they watched repeated scenes of orating weatherpersons, the tormented Gulf, and the impacted highways leading away from it. The phone rang several times: people who ran bed-and-breakfasts were hunting rooms for new arrivals they couldn't accommodate. Gwen hesitated to take in strangers, but finally accepted an NOPD cop on his honeymoon, and in due course a thick-bodied young man named Tommy Leboeuf and his new bride, Lydia — who [Jim thought privately] looked less like a blushing bride than a hooker from a Texarkana truckstop — showed up in a shiny new pink-champagne-colored Cadillac.

The Leboeufs went straight to bed. To make room for them, Jim moved into Gwen's room, murmuring as he unpacked for the second time that he hoped he wasn't destroying her reputation as a Christian woman. "Honey," she replied, "desperate times require desperate measures."

That night they both slept badly. The wind was picking up, the storm passing over the mouth of the Mississippi and veering eastward, back into the open Gulf, heading now for the Redneck Riviera with its white sand beaches, endless bungalows, and garish motel-and-casino strips. Jim understood that the storm's counterclockwise winds must also be pushing the Gulf into Lake Pontchartrain, the lake into the city; the thought kept him restless, and his unease made sleep difficult for her.

Toward dawn he fell asleep at last, only to wake suddenly to the incessant rattling of window sashes. Greenish daylight filtered through the drapes, and so did the wind, setting all Gwen's furbelows into tremulous motion. He dressed, hastened downstairs, and found her in the kitchen, sitting at the battered table where they ate, left hand pressed to her mouth, gazing at the TV screen. When Jim touched her, she took his hand without turning to look at him.

"Where's that?" he asked, staring at a widening breach in a concrete floodwall, with coffee-colored water pouring through.

But he didn't hear or need to hear her answer. The wall guarded the Seventeenth Street Canal, less than six blocks from Lark Street. Lakeside was doomed.

He muttered, "The future ain't long at all."

* * *

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That afternoon they took a siesta together, lying side by side in their underwear on Gwen's bed.

They held each other and Gwen cried for friends she'd known, for houses where she'd partied, for the deleted portion of her youth and memories. Jim wanted to cry, but couldn't. Grief stifled him. What do you do when your life is nothing but the past, and the past is suddenly swept away?

Bonaparte had a wild night of howling wind, tossing boughs, and crashing trees. It was only the western edge of the storm, but the power went off, the air conditioning died, and Jim and Gwen retreated to the front gallery, where they sat in the tumultuous darkness, holding hands. She said more than once, "Jim, I'm so sorry," but he only grunted.

Next day the power came back on and they viewed the scope of the catastrophe in New Orleans. Television showed three-fourths of the city submerged in water, with islands of fire. Where was the President, where was the army, where was everybody? Days slipped by like a road without mileposts as the world gazed at hunger, filth, and thirst in the Superdome, exhausted people sweltering on blinding-white freeway bridges that rose out of newborn lakes and marshes, bodies floating and swelling at familiar intersections gone unrecognizable. Looters stumbled through knee-deep water, toting stolen TVs in a city without power. On quiet Uptown streets, oaks gracefully mirrored themselves in canals where no canals were supposed to be.

And Jim was so far away, so comfortable, so safe. He felt bubble-wrapped.

Bonapartians gave fund-raisers for evacuees who'd run out of money; churches prayed for the dead and gathered food and clothing for the living. People Jim had never met stopped him on the street to ask how things were going "down there" — as if he knew! Olivia hugged him and cried against his shirt and refused to take any money for the extra trouble he was giving her. He held her and for the first time cried too, not for anything he'd lost, but for the utterly unexpected kindness of strangers.

The town was full of refugees now, and they had little to do but gossip. They checked maps posted on Google and divided into castes based on how deep their houses had flooded. Jim gained some cachet at a charity jazz brunch when an Uptowner remarked that his house was high and dry on the natural levee of the Mississippi. Jim said, "Mine was on the natural

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levee of the Seventeenth Street Canal," and the Uptowner retired from the field, badly worsted. Yet the Davy Jones Award didn't go to Jim. During a break when the musicians were lunching, the pianist commented *en passant* that his concert grand at home was under twelve feet of water. Somewhat staggered by this — what were they talking, a fifty-thousand-dollar instrument? — Jim heard himself rather stupidly saying he didn't suppose it would be worth much now. The musician replied, "Well, not as a *piano*," returned to his bench, and launched into a riff, triumphant in this curious sweepstake where you won by losing.

Those stories were nonfiction. There was also plenty of fiction to be heard. Tommy Leboeuf came up with new and more colorful tales at every gathering. At the jazz brunch he became the center of attention by revealing that he'd earned a week's leave to get married by first serving at the Superdome during the worst of times. While he was there, a predator took advantage of the darkness and disorder to rape two children, and when Tommy and his partner caught him, they threw him to the mob and watched them tear him limb from limb.

"Me, I'da liked to jern in, 'cept I was on duty," he said, and all the polite folks in their ice-cream suits and summer dresses nodded agreement. Jim and Gwen, knowing perfectly well that Tommy and Lydia had fled the city *before* the storm hit, wigwagged to each other with raised eyebrows, but said nothing.

Still, Gwen had had enough of her Cadillac-driving charity cases with their tall tales, and she told them they'd have to leave. They departed while she and Jim were out to dinner, taking with them a harvest of knickknacks from the house. A couple of days later, Jim saw the cop and his lady friend on TV. They'd been arrested in St. Louis on a warrant for a stolen Cadillac. Lydia *was* a hooker ("exotic entertainer," said the reporter), though from Biloxi and not Texarkana. Their stories had one real element: Tommy Leboeuf was a cop, and soon faced charges of desertion as well as grand theft, auto.

Gwen said, "Well, how about that lying, thieving sonofabitch!" But Jim said that a crooked cop made him homesick.

That joke was typical of his dry humor. But an undercurrent of horror ran beneath his thoughts of home. Stories about attics formed a staple of

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TV news, and every time he saw one he thought of what might be waiting for him at 488 Lark Street. He couldn't shake the image of dead people sprawled out and rotting in the recreation room he and Dot had worked so hard to build out of the dusty emptiness.

Who could have taken refuge there, and when and why? Alas, there was an obvious answer. Most of his neighbors lived in one-story ranch-styles built on slabs. His attic might have been the highest spot around when the floodwall collapsed and a tsunami poured into Lakeside. Several neighbors kept keys to his house for emergencies, as he kept keys to theirs, so getting in wouldn't have been a problem for old Dr. Dreyfus, the Campbells, Carol and Jean, and their little dogs, Bunch and Bundle.

Was that what had happened? He had no way to find out; the land lines were down and when he tried to call into area code 504 on Gwen's cell phone, he roused only monotonous robot voices saying the towers were down, everything was out of service.

In front of the TV, he stared hypnotized at stories about desperate people trying to break out of attic prisons, images of rescuers from airboats and helicopters breaking in. Here, the searchers found only a guttered candle, a half-empty Fritos bag, a plastic water bottle. There, the remains of an old man who'd holed up and drowned clawing at a roof he couldn't break through. A black kid pointed to what had been his house and told a CBS reporter, "Mama's up there, and she's stuck to the floor."

By now Jim had forgotten what sound sleep meant. He woke and dozed and woke again. He wanted to go home and, at the same time, wanted never to go home. Life went on all around him, yet increasingly apart. Gwen had wasted enough time away from her business, and spent the days at her phones and her PC, lining up customers for new textbooks and multimedia gadgetry. Meanwhile he idled around Bonaparte, an accidental tourist, viewing such depressing sights as the overgrown and cricket-haunted Confederate cemetery, and the Catholic basilica whose many spires made him think of a crown of thorns.

He ate often with strangers, devouring information about New Orleans with greater appetite than the bland, heavy food. Refugees swapped stories as they consumed burgers at Cow-Cow Boogie or munched huge, tasteless crab salads at the Plantation Kitchen. All of them except Jim carried arsenals of gadgetry that beeped and vibrated and played the

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opening bars of "My Blue Heaven," and by one means or another they all seemed to have reached hundreds of contacts who were ready and willing to give eye-witness accounts of the city.

So he learned that Uptown now was dry and the power back on. Bourbon Street was flourishing again, all sleaze, noise, and neon. The casinos were rushing repairs, seeing gold in a new flood, this time of construction workers pouring into town to stuff the pockets of their jeans with FEMA money. Whores were, as ever, fully employed.

Elsewhere the news was not so good. Plaquemines Parish was mostly under the Gulf, patrolled by pompano, redfish, and mackerel instead of the Isleño fishermen whose ancestors had come from the Canaries centuries ago to catch them. Poor-white St. Bernard Parish had hardly a house standing. Lakeside? Still forbidden country, daytimes roasting in the merciless sun, nighttimes dark under a sliver of new moon.

One day five weeks after the storm he told Gwen, "I've got to go back and see what's left of my house. If anything."

She nodded. She'd been expecting the news, had been Googling the situation too, and had already reached her own conclusions. She'd changed her locks after the Leboeufs departed, and now gave him a set of the new keys.

"You won't find much down there," she warned. "I'm flying to Albuquerque. Those people need bilingual textbooks whether they know it or not. When you come back, just let yourself in. You know where everything is. The stuff you salvage from Lakeside — let me see.... Put it in the garage. We can park our cars outside for a while."

All this was brusque and businesslike, and it didn't go down at all well. Where did she get off, taking charge of his future? After all, *his* life had been destroyed, not hers. All he could feel now was the sense of loss, a palpable absence like an amputee's phantom limb. What to do about it he didn't yet know. Until he faced the bodies of his neighbors lying amid the wreckage of his home, he couldn't decide...decide...decide what?

Maybe whether to bother living on. His father had faced that question once, and decided not to.

When he was packed and ready to go, Gwen surprised him by embracing him passionately, then holding his head in both hands and crying against his cheek. He whispered, "I'll be back, I'll see you soon,"

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over and over. Then he drove away, wondering if either of them really believed it.

TRAFFIC ON I-55 south was heavy but moving well, a river of homebound license plates. I-10 east was frantic, the center lanes filled with swaying empty FEMA trailers under tow, racing to dates with the homeless. Trucks and cars filled the other lanes like rush hour on a California freeway, a traffic jam moving at 75 mph, everybody driving with the pedal to the metal, frantic for their first sight of bad news.

When the city rose out of the marshes, Jim didn't see much destruction at first, just blue plastic tarps covering damaged roofs. Expecting police roadblocks in Lakeside, he turned into the Uptown. Here, instead of hysteria, an eerie quiet prevailed — the traffic sporadic, the streets clear, Chinese walls of debris piled along the curbs, huge yellow trucks and handling machines with bigger teeth than the denizens of *Jurassic Park* hunkering between the oaks on the wide grassy median of St. Charles Avenue. He smelled for the first time the dry stink of the city, the decay of sheetrock and insulation, carpets and wood soaked with the foul residue of departed floodwater.

Yet some people were home and starting to clean up. Duct-taped refrigerators lined the streets like fat tombstones, many with spray-painted epitaphs, some political (CHENEY INSIDE — DO NOT OPEN), some gastronomical (FREE LUNCH — MAGGOTS ONLY), some vaguely erotic (MR. TRASHMAN! TAKE ME, I'M YOURS!). On doors and housefronts he saw spray-painted signs, many enigmatic like X/OB, but others perfectly clear, like U LOOT — I SHOOT. A hand-painted sign on a barricaded shop that sold Persian rugs warned:

I AM INSIDE SLEEPING
WITH A BIG DOG
AN UGLY WOMAN
TWO SHOTGUNS
AND A CLAW HAMMER

That made him smile; his congested spirit lightened. Suddenly he felt hungry, and began to search for food. Outside Magnum's, a four-star

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restaurant whose roof had mostly blown off, he found chefs in tall white hats making hamburgers on open grills, adding to each a dollop of bleu cheese and a squirt of some sauce from a secret recipe. Jim stopped to eat a burger — *Finally some food with an attitude!* — drink an icy Coke that tasted better than Mumm's, and troll for information.

Some customers had brought folding chairs, à la Mardi Gras. Others lolled on green grass that had never tasted floodwater, or huddled under battered oaks and date palms in scant spots of shade. Like all New Orleans crowds, they were noisy as a cage of toucans; gossip had always been a popular local sport, and everybody talked to everybody, for everybody had a story to tell.

A young guy wearing a T-shirt that said THANKS KATRINA, THAT WAS A HELL OF A BLOW JOB told about meeting two girls who'd come to town to save abandoned animals; he offered to share his house with them and wound up living in a Noah's Ark of dogs, cats, horses, and chickens. ("But no nooky," he added in an aside to Jim. "Just my luck, those ol' gals only like animals and each other.") An eighty-year-old Dutchman so gnarled as to resemble a driftwood statue told gutturally how he'd stayed home through the whole damn thing, the storm and the aftermath, drinking bottled water and eating MREs cadged from the army. "Vot I care about floods for, anyvay?" he demanded.

Jim talked to a young woman named Molly. Attired in shorts, bra, and flip-flops, she'd wrestled a defunct refrigerator to the curb, then come out for food. Her freckled face shone with grease, her body with a fine sheen of perspiration. She told him he'd have trouble entering Lakeside. The water was all gone, pumped back into the lake, but the power was still out and the army had blocked all the usual entry routes. The only people living half normally in the area were in the big houses along the lakeside ridge, where behind the green levees the ample L.A.-style dwellings of the rich and tasteless had passed through the storm almost unscathed.

Then Molly had an idea. "Look," she said, "most of these guys in the Hummers are from out of town. When they stop you, show them your driver's license and say — what street did you say you lived on?"

"Lark."

"Tell them your house is right off Lakeshore Drive and the power's on

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there. They won't know the difference. Say you've already been there and you left to get ice, is all."

In the end Jim's problem, like so many, solved itself. He drove down Elysian Fields between rolling prairies of wreckage that would have done honor to a major war. When he passed Hummers, young guys in cammies waved languidly at him or simply sat, cradling their rifles and chewing gum. Nobody stopped him until the wreckage itself did. At the border of Lakeside he had to get out and walk the last mile under the dazing sun, clambering over toppled poles and trees, watched by starving dogs uncertain whether to beg him for help or eat him.

And so he came back to No. 488, Lark Street.

He unlocked and forced the front door open, stared and gasped. Then scuffed inside over stinking mud that lay caked and gray on what had been honey-colored heart-pine floors.

The silver-framed pictures had vanished, maybe into the hands of looters. The furniture had floated here and there in the oddest way — a new Sony TV was standing on its head, while the dining room table had ascended the stairs about halfway before becoming stranded. Protected by its layers of varnish, his mother's portrait in oil looked down on the ruin, astonished but unharmed.

The bathtub ring was roughly at four feet. Yet the flood had initially been much higher. The tsunami had rushed down Lark Street, knocked in windows, filled the houses, then subsided to the lower level — where it sat, and sat, and sat for weeks on end. As a result, black mold made the pale walls look like monochrome Jackson Pollocks. Thirteen inches of rain had come through the roof and contributed to the ruin. In the kitchen, the ceiling had fallen on the stove, insects buzzed and unseen frogs brayed as they had in the pools of the vanished *cyprière*. Tiny flies hovered around the fridge amid whiffs of graveyard odor. Jim knew the creatures well; common fruit flies, *Drosophila melanogaster* — he used to breed them in his lab.

Getting to the second floor was tough. The table had lodged at a precarious angle, blocking his way, and he had to wrestle it loose and tip it over the banister, back into the ruin of the dining area. But at last he stood panting and streaming sweat in the upstairs hall. He touched the

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doorknob of the bedroom where he and Dot had slept for twenty years. Then thought: *No, I don't want to see it, and thank God she can't.* He climbed the last flight of steps, the ones he'd built himself when he was preparing to floor and insulate the attic, and pulled open the door at the top.

Above him the suspended ceiling and the pink battens of insulation were mostly gone and stripes of hard blue sky slotted the brown rafters. The wind must have roared through here, emptying his desk, taking south all but one page of prophetically named *Vanished Worlds*. The pocket billiard table balanced like an acrobat on the legs of an overturned captain's chair. One of the retired armchairs had been flung against the far wall and smashed. Yet a guitar he'd trucked around the country back in the Sixties — his sole adventure before Dot came along — still hung from a nail in a sheltered corner, a fragile survivor of the wind's manic attack. The jukebox stood unmoved, seemingly ready to light up in orange and purple glory. A green anole lizard basking in a dapple of sunlight on the selection keys turned its head and watched Jim with an eye like a tiny bead of black glass.

So Madame Lott had been wrong. Nobody had died here. He'd come all this way, slogging through the ruins, risking heatstroke, only to gaze on the mutilated face of everything he'd been and done with his time on earth.

Suddenly he felt faint. He leaned over and vomited; a fist seemed to close on his chest, and for a few seconds he couldn't breathe. Time compressed, then expanded, and he was out on Lark Street again.

He really didn't know how he'd gotten out of the house, and yet here he was, drifting along like any idler, watching through the swags of power lines as guys in gloves, masks, plastic coveralls, and blue hardhats came around a huge trash pile blocking the corner. Accompanied by a big brown dog, they began making their way slowly toward him across the blasted plain that once had been his part of New Orleans.

He wondered whether they might take him for a looter, maybe arrest him. But they passed him by, attentive to their jobs, paying him no attention — except for the dog, a rangy mutt with bloodhound in his genes and furrows above his eyes, who sniffed warily in the vicinity of Jim's feet until his trainer pulled the leash and recalled him to duty.

Systematically the men worked through house after house, kicking in

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doors where they had to, trusting the dog's educated nose as to whether they should enter or not. Afterward they spray-painted X/OB on the walls, and now he understood its meaning: HOUSE CHECKED — NO BODIES.

They reached 488, and the dog began to bay. For the first time, somebody went inside. Jim watched with a tingling sense of having missed something all-important. After five minutes the searcher emerged and put in a call on a cell phone. Then the team dawdled until, with an unholy racket, a helicopter dropped out of the sky and landed with all the usual rattle and roar beside the errant garage, the prop creating its own mini-hurricane.

When two guardsmen in brown and green-spotted fatigues jumped out and carried a stainless steel gurney into his front door, Jim started forward, moving like a man breasting a strong chill current, trying to shout, and angry at the way everybody ignored him.

Then the gurney reappeared, carrying a burden in a black plastic bag. All he could do was stare. The guardsmen loaded it, jumped aboard again, and the helicopter departed in a tornado of white dust. The guy who'd gone into the house spray-painted X/1B on Jim's front door, and he and his team moved on.

SO NOW HE KNEW the score. During his life people had often called him boring, but never stupid.

In a dream he entered his house again, this time with singular ease, delighting in the soft glow of the honey-colored pine floor, the gleam of the silver picture frames on the mantel. The shadow puppets danced sinuously on their bamboo wands, dark eyes watched him through the Venetian masks, and the Goddess of Mercy raised two fingers in serene blessing as he passed.

Upstairs the jukebox began to play "Unchained Melody," the 1956 version that he'd heard the first time and danced to (clumsily, of course) with Gwen at a high school hop. Jim ascended the stairs without effort, glancing *en passant* into the bedroom, noting that it was looking neater than it had in a long while, thinking that Dot must have made the bed and tidied up.

The attic stairs, the open door. The recreation room was crowded — Dot leafing through a *Better Homes and Gardens*, Papa relaxing in one of

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the tattered old easy chairs, and the mother he could hardly remember gazing through the casement window at a bygone Lakeside of building sites, scattered new homes, and small thin pines. Madame Lott was there too, dandling two sleeping brown babies on her wide lap, and Jim recalled suddenly hearing her say once that she owned a house in the Ninth Ward.

He tried to tell her, *No, I want this but not yet, Gwen's waiting for me, I haven't finished with life, this is too soon.* She looked at him and shook her head, somehow conveying, without anything being said, that Gwen had only been an interlude, that she and he weren't made to stay together for long.

Then Dot looked up and smiled, and his mother turned to him with astonished gray eyes — he'd been all of three years old when she'd seen him last — and Papa raised his head and smiled one of his rare smiles. Home, really home at last and forever, Jim relaxed and moved with open arms toward the other inhabitants of his personal heaven.

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Judith Moffett's first stories of the Hefn invasion were assembled into the novel The Ragged World, *which was followed by another novel,* Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream. *Her most recent story in the series was "The Bear's Baby" in our Oct/Nov 2003 issue. These days, Ms. Moffett divides her time between Swarthmore, PA, and a hill farm in Kentucky. She says she has finished up work on a third Hefn novel (of which this story forms a part) and she is now writing and publishing more poetry again. For this story, Ms. Moffett is grateful to Polly Schaafsma, and to Solveig A. Turpin and Jim Zintgraff, whose written and photographic work on Pecos River rock art were of great help.*

The Bird Shaman's Girl

By Judith Moffett

1

EVEN AT THE END OF MAY you could find snow in the Wasatch Range of Utah if you went high enough — snow on the ground, snow occasionally falling from the sky. Pam Pruitt stood behind one of the cameramen and watched a group of actors haul their burdened handcarts up a steep slope. Wooden wheels screeched on wooden axles. Neil Reeder, a handsome teen in a tattered coat and britches, with a rag tied over his head and ears, was pushing a cart from behind while a man and woman strained backwards as they pulled on the handle. Snow swirled around them. As he passed the camera Neil looked directly into the lens, face contorted with effort and determination, heavy shoes slipping on the icy stones. The next instant a wheel came off the cart and Neil, with a startled yelp, went sprawling.

"Cut!" the director yelled. "We'll do one more take, folks. Dave, move that mark two feet downhill, I want Neil to release the wheel a little

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sooner." The actors trooped back down the slope while props people reattached the wheel and rolled the carts down. Neil saw Pam standing with Lexi Allred, his costar in the series they were filming, and waved. Pam and Lexi waved back. "Places, everybody. Neil, see the mark? About two feet sooner." Neil nodded. The director called "Ready? Roll 'em. And — action!" And the Ephremite pioneers began again to toil up the mountainside, pulling and pushing their handcarts toward the New Jerusalem and the cameras.

Pam glanced sideways at Lexi, eleven years old and in a peck of trouble. Lexi, radiantly beautiful even in that getup, stood clutching a silvery emergency blanket over her long dress and shawls. Feeling Pam's regard upon her, she looked up and smiled, and Pam smiled back.

This time the director was satisfied with the broken wheel and the actors regrouped to begin a different scene. "I'm in this one," Lexi said. She gave the emergency blanket to Pam. Walking to join the others, she lifted her shawls and redraped them so they covered her head as well as her shoulders. Pam shook out and folded up the blanket, and handed it to RoLayne Allred, who had come to stand beside her. "Can you take charge of this? I might get called away before they finish the scene."

"Fine," said Lexi's mother. She half-looked at Pam as she tucked the blanket under her arm, a look of mingled resentment and shame.

Years of being Liaison Officer for Child Oversight in Utah had conditioned Pam to ignore such looks. Lowering her voice, keeping it friendly, she said "How do you feel she's doing?"

"She seems to be doing all right."

"Have you talked about it with her much?"

"That counselor you're making her see is the one she talks to," Lexi's mother said, and this time the resentment was unmistakable.

Pam counted to ten before replying, with a kindness that was at least partly genuine, "She feels bad about getting her granddad in trouble, you know — she feels like the abuse was *her* fault somehow, that's very common. You could help with that, RoLayne. I know it would be a huge relief to her if *you* could talk about it with her — reassure her that she did the right thing to turn him in."

The director called for action and they watched Lexi struggle up a different slope (with less trampled snow) at the front of a group of shawled

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women, heads bowed against the wind and swirling flakes. The able-bodied women were helping haul the carts; these, as Pam and RoLayne could see, in front of them and on the monitor screen, were all too old, young, pregnant, or enfeebled to do more than totter along behind. Where the ascent was less steep, some would ride.

It wasn't a scene where the onlookers had to keep completely quiet, and Lexi's mother murmured, "Well, I can't very well say what I don't believe."

Pam murmured back, "That she was right to tell? But surely — "

"Tell you Gaians. I don't think that was right myself, so you needn't expect me to say it was."

Pam gritted her teeth. "But surely it's less important whether she told us she was being molested, or told her Canon, or her parents, than that she told *somebody*." When Mrs. Allred didn't reply, Pam gestured up the slope and led her companion farther from the microphones. In a normal voice she said, "Kids often feel guilty at the commotion it causes when they report abuse. That's why it's so vital that they be reassured by the people they love and trust the most. Lexi really needs to hear that it's not her fault people are so upset, and she needs to hear it from you."

"Tell her yourself," RoLayne said shortly. "I've already given her my opinion, which is that she should've come to the Canon and let *him* talk to her grandfather. In the Ephremite Church even children have a responsibility to put the good of the Church ahead of their own good." She flashed Pam a look of pure hostility. "I don't expect you to understand that, but it's true."

"Well, but — her grandfather and the Canon are old friends," Pam said, still hanging on to her reasonable tone, which was getting harder to do, "so you couldn't really expect her to go to him about this."

"What I expect her to do," said RoLayne, "is her moral duty. I'll tell you one thing I do know. I know whose fault it is that she'll have nothing to do with the Church anymore, since you Gaians got ahold of her."

"That's a wrap!" the director called. "Good job, everybody. Take ten. Neil, I need you for a sec."

The group of toiling women broke formation and headed for the hot-drinks trailer, and Lexi, seeing her mother and Pam standing together, ran over to them. RoLayne shook out the silver blanket. As she wrapped it

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around her daughter, Lexi said, "Mom, could you fix this? I stepped on it and it ripped out." She held up the hem of her tattered dress with both hands.

RoLayne examined the hem. "Oh, I think so. Let's go see if we can't find a needle and thread." She slipped an arm around Lexi's shoulders and propelled her toward the props trailer. Pam she ignored.

Lexi, however, turned inside her mother's half-hug to look back at Pam. "We'll be done pretty soon. I'm still coming home with you, right?"

"Right. I can wait, there's no hurry."

"Is Humphrey still hibernating?"

"Yep. It'll just be us tonight for dinner, but I got out another cobbler anyway."

Lexi beamed — she knew blackberry cobbler was the Hefn Humphrey's favorite food on earth — and turned away. RoLayne's stiff back spoke volumes, but there was nothing she could do. Pam felt a twinge of sympathy. Only a twinge, though. If there was one thing she could not abide, it was a parent who protected her belief system and herself at the expense of her child's well-being.

Apart from RoLayne, Pam enjoyed these visits to Lexi on location. Ephremite history fascinated her. Founded by a visionary and led for decades by a genius-level businessman, the Church of Ephrem the Prophet was a purely American product. Early persecution, climaxing in martyrdom, had united and empowered the Ephremites as a people set apart. They established a kingdom in a desert, and the kingdom thrived. Deprivations? Plagues of locusts? Military occupation? Mass arrests and jailings? They rose above it all; their indomitability kept pace with their suffering. A mulish determination to triumph over adversity seemed hardwired into the collective Ephremite psyche. As a people they were tough as nails, and the toughness had survived into modern times. The more Pam learned about them, the more she admired them for it.

But child sexual abuse had long been a special problem among the Ephremites; and — as with the Catholic Church — a powerful, patriarchal, self-protective governing authority had allowed the problem to persist and spread. The Ephremite community was deeply family-centered, with many children and lots of activities organized for them. All those Scout

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troops needed leaders. If you were a good God-fearing Ephremite pedophile, you had no trouble finding victims, in or out of your own family, and nothing much to prevent you, or help you if you wanted to stop. Every Ephremite male was inducted into the Meshak Priesthood when he turned eighteen. For children raised to believe that members of a Priesthood held a God-given authority over them, disobedience was not an easy option. What Lexi had done by exposing her grandfather had taken more nerve than anyone unaware of all this could possibly appreciate.

The Ephremite Church's way of dealing with the problem was to encourage repentance and forgiveness, to counsel wives that the main thing was to keep the family together and that kids needed their father at home. A perpetrator's local Church authority, his Canon, would explain — and honestly believe — that pedophilia was basically a moral problem, that could be cured with prayer and counsel.

The Hefn solution of assigning all child-abuse cases to the Gaians worked a lot better than prayer and repentance did. But the Ephremite leadership hierarchy, stripped of authority where certain of their members were concerned, could perhaps not be expected to feel very grateful.

2

WHEN THE MYSTERIOUS and powerful Hefn had arrived on Earth, they'd been horrified to discover a sentient species there, busily destroying its own biosphere. Taking charge, they'd set out at once to reverse the damage. They imposed sweeping reforms on agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing; they established the Baby Ban, mass infertility brought about by mass hypnotic suggestion. Also, one Hefn — Humphrey — set up the Bureau of Temporal Physics, where young math intuitives, known as Apprentices, were trained to operate alien devices that could be used to locate the placetimes in human prehistory where people had once lived in harmony with their world.

The Bureau's findings had launched the Gaian Movement, with its mission of converting humanity to values that could help heal the Earth and get the Baby Ban revoked. For converts this had involved choosing a piece of land as a personal Ground, and developing an intimate

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relationship with that Ground over time, a process called "living into" the land. That part of Gaian teachings had appealed to Lexi enormously; it was largely because of it that she'd fled to the Salt Lake Gaian Mission a little more than three months before.

But now Lexi and Pam were sitting on Pam's back porch steps before dinner, feeding lumps of dry dog food soaked in water to the juvenile robins Pam had been rehabbing for the Salt Lake Aviary. And Pam was explaining that the Gaians had decided to change their focus.

"You're supposed to think about your *family*?" Lexi asked dubiously.

"Mm-hm. Where they came from, where they live now. Like, all the Ephremite families that settled the Great Basin and made the desert blossom as the rose." She pulled a wad of dog food in half and fed the halves to a badly banged-up robin she called Gimpy. Wingy sailed in to demand his share.

"Oh."

"*Your* family was part of that, right? Here, Greedy Guts." Pam poked a piece of food into Wingy, who gulped it down. Behind the garden, seven mallard ducklings splashed and squeaked in their plastic wading pool.

"On my dad's side. Mom's relatives came from Denmark later on. My dad's great-great-I-don't-know-how-many-greats-grandparents came with a wagon train. They've got it all written down in a book at home."

They would; Ephremite genealogical resources were the best in the world. "But they've lived in Utah a long time."

"Yeah. Mostly. When did you say you were getting back from your trip?"

Pam suppressed a sigh. "It's only just over this weekend, sweetie. I'll be back on Monday." Lexi had been told this several times, but anxiety made her keep asking; she didn't want Pam to leave Salt Lake. "I really do have to go, Humphrey's orders. There's still a lot to decide about Homeland, that's the new term we're using, but I'll be back before you know it."

Lexi kept her eyes on the wet lump of kibble she was squeezing. Pam said brightly, "I was thinking today, up on location, that acting in *A Thousand Miles* is a terrific way to focus on the country that means the most to you and your family — I mean your whole family, Lexi, I'm not counting your granddad. You and Neil *really* know what a high price the

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first settlers paid to get here, and how important that makes this land to their descendants — it's *their* Homeland, see?"

The soggy lumps were disappearing fast. Pesky hopped onto Lexi's knee, and Lexi, delighted, fed him a lump herself. She didn't push it far enough down his throat, but he threw his head back and managed to swallow it anyway. "Good!" said Pam. "Try to stick it a little farther in, like this."

"I wish they didn't change it. I know Humphrey said the old way didn't get enough converts. But I liked it better."

Stuffed, the robins withdrew. Pam snapped the lid back on the kibble soaker, a margarine tub from Landfill Plastics, and smiled at Lexi. "Tell you the truth, I did too, but Humphrey and the missionaries think more people can relate to what the Gaians are saying if we do it like this, through family ties to land that's been lived into for a long time, so the land and the people really belong to each other. Like, you know...getting together at Christmas with all your relatives at the old home place, the special feeling you get from that." Seeing the child frown, Pam wondered what feelings she had just conjured up, and added hastily, "But anybody who wants to can still go the old way and choose a personal Ground. We're trying to bring more people in, not push anybody out."

Lexi looked relieved. "What are *you* gonna do, keep on with your Ground in Kentucky?"

"Actually, in my case Homeland won't make that much difference," Pam said. "I was a grounded Gaian steward long before we decided to change our approach. But it can be good to go at things from more than one direction." She grabbed the tub of kibble, stood, and smiled down at Lexi, sitting on the step still looking worried. "So what about *your* dinner, are you hungry yet?"

Lexi got up slowly. "It won't make any difference in my case either, the Homeland thing won't. I'm sticking with *The Secret Garden.* Like when Mary Lennox says 'Might I have a bit of earth?' — like that."

She spoke the line, in Mary's British accent, with a wistful hopefulness so utterly convincing that Pam shivered. She put her hand on Lexi's shoulder and squeezed. "You be Gaia's actor, kiddo. Anything else would be a shameful waste of talent."

* * *

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When they broke for lunch on the first day of the conference, Pam went back to her room and checked her messages: a brief one from her deputy, Jaime Rivera, that boiled down to "Everything's under control"; an even briefer one from Lexi in a tattered sun bonnet, evidently sent on a break between scenes: "Hi, sorry to bother you on your trip but could you please call me right away?"

Oh, Lexi. Yawning hugely — none of the conferees had gotten much sleep — Pam pushed the recall button. The face that flickered onto the screen was that of Marcee Morgenstern, producer of *A Thousand Miles*. "Hi," said Pam. "I'm returning a call from Lexi."

"From Lexi? Lexi's gone AWOL!" Marcee looked angry and flustered. "You say you're *returning* a call? When was this? What did she say?"

Wide awake now, Pam checked the readout. "Looks like...about two hours ago. Eleven forty-six Utah time. I'm in California at a conference, I left my phone in my room this morning, only found out she'd tried to reach me a few minutes ago. She just said to call her. What do you mean by AWOL?"

"She finished her last scene and I sent her to get out of makeup. About twenty minutes later here's RoLayne having hysterics, where's Lexi, has anybody seen Lexi. Which nobody had — including makeup, she never showed up over there. We all dropped everything to look for her, but so far no luck. I'm going to tan her bottom when we get ahold of her, this has played holy heck with the schedule and we were already a day behind — "

She was going to do no such thing, but Pam understood how she felt. "How long have you been looking?"

"I don't know, an hour maybe, or a little less."

"An hour?" Pam relaxed. "That's not very long. Maybe she went for a walk."

Marcee glared. "She's under strict orders not to wander off, *remember*?"

Pam herself had given those strict orders when the abuse had been reported. "Yes, of course she is, I'm sorry."

"Nobody's got a clue where she could have gone." Marcee's voice slid up dangerously. "And *I* haven't got a clue how she managed to slip off, there are people everywhere up here keeping an eye on her!"

A pang of real alarm shot through Pam. "Okay, I'll notify my office. If she doesn't turn up soon we'll bring in the police."

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"If she calls you again — "

"I'll handle it. Let me know the minute you find her, okay?"

The instant she hung up, something very peculiar happened; Pam could feel her consciousness expand and zoom in, like a powerful microscope, on the details of Lexi's situation. In this state of preternatural keenness Pam's mind informed her that one of two things had certainly happened: either Church authorities had snatched Lexi, or she'd run away to escape being snatched by Church authorities. Her mind was astounded at its own failure to see this coming. The Ephremite leadership had agents everywhere, they knew the Hefn had summoned the Apprentices and the Gaian leadership to a conference; obviously they would not have been slow to seize their moment.

When things abruptly shifted back to normal, Pam managed to stay focused, disoriented and freaked out though she was. Were people holding Lexi, or was she all by herself somewhere up Emigration Canyon, scared to death? A kidnapping, if that's what it was, had the earmarks of an inside job.

She thought a minute, then punched her phone. When Humphrey answered she said simply, "I have to go home. Lexi's disappeared and I'm as sure as I can be that the Ephremites are behind it. They've been raising Cain about Gaians having jurisdiction in a case involving an Ephremite kid. If I leave now I should make the 13:58 express."

"They do this always, raise the Cain?" He meant, whenever Child Welfare Oversight took custody of an Ephremite child, which happened several times a year.

"They do, but this kid's famous, it's giving them a big public black eye. And there's something else — something happened, I had this very weird mental experience...I'll tell you later, but now I really need to go."

The Hefn's tiny likeness stared at her from the phone: great opaque eyes, face covered with short gray hair, full gray beard. Pam said, "Humphrey, this is extremely important. I can't explain how I know that, but it is."

Surprisingly, he didn't argue, only said soberly, "When we have finished here, I will come to Salt Lake if you have not found Lexi. I would like very much to hear more about the weird experience."

"If we haven't found her, I'd love it if you could interview her

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mother." *Probe her twisted little mind,* she meant. "But do please come either way."

He made his neckless imitation of a nod. "I have said so."

"Good luck then. I wouldn't leave for any other reason," Pam said, and cut the connection. Then she called Jaime.

3

THE SLEDCAR had been fitted with hard rubber tires for summer, which made for a bumpy ride. Barefoot, in her raggedy dress, Lexi sat shoved up against the car's passenger door, as far away from her grandfather as the seat belt would let her get. She was trying not to make a sound as they jounced along, but her makeup was streaked with tears.

Her grandfather, Edgar Carstairs, was making the sledcar labor up the mountain at its top speed — not that fast but still way too fast for the condition of the road. Both of them kept being thrown around, but Lexi had no way to hold on; her hands had been tied behind her with a leather boot lace. Granpa's face wore a funny look of grim satisfaction. Once he and RoLayne had got Lexi bundled into the car, he'd paid no attention to her, except that when she had asked — careful not to sound panicky — "What's happening? Where are we going?" he stopped the car just long enough to pull her arms behind her and whip the thong around her wrists.

"That's in case you should take a notion to jump out," he said. "We're going someplace no Hefn and no Hefn-lovers would ever think to look. And by the way," he added in a mean voice, "don't you worry about me lovin' on you anymore. The very idea of lovin' on a little brat that would go and tattle to the Gaians makes me sick." He whirled on her suddenly. "You ought to be ashamed! Embarrassing me, that's bad enough — do you know you got me thrown in *jail*? Your own grandfather? But slinging mud at the Church, now, that's beyond anything."

Granpa looked a little crazy while making this speech, glaring at Lexi, spit spraying, face working. The car lurched wildly. She shrank away from him in fear. Also in guilt. Despite what the counselor kept telling her, and what Pam and her dad had told her, Ephremite conditioning went bone-deep with Lexi.

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They ground along in silence for a while. Finally she asked timidly, "Do Mom and Dad know where you're taking me?"

Granpa smirked. "Your mom knows where I told her I was taking you, but that's not where we're going. And your dad, he's a know-nothin' from the word go. Now I want you to sit still and shut your mouth."

This was a side of Granpa Lexi had never seen, or even consciously suspected. All her life he had treated her like a princess, in a kind of artificial, saccharine way, even when he was doing things to her in the dark. She had dreaded spending time with him alone, but she hadn't exactly been *terrified*, like afraid for her life. But this crazy-seeming stranger frightened her so much it was hard to think.

The one hopeful thing was that she'd left the message for Pam after catching a glimpse of her Granpa, who wasn't allowed to be anywhere around her right now, through the window in the wardrobe trailer bathroom. She'd come out, gone straight to the phone, and made the call, reluctant somehow to say in her message what she was calling about. Then it was time to do a scene, and then another scene that had required multiple takes, and after that Marcee said she was done for the day. Lexi'd been on her way to get out of makeup when her mother, sounding happy and excited, had called to her to come and look at something out behind the trailer. By that time she'd forgotten about Granpa, and that was when they'd tossed the blanket over her head and shoved her into the car.

"Mom!" she pleaded when she'd been strapped in and the blanket came off. RoLayne looked over her shoulder furtively. "Honey, everything's fine, don't worry. Just mind Granpa, do what he tells you. I'll see you real soon." She squeezed Lexi's arm through the car window, and they started moving.

Remembering all this gave Lexi an idea, something to grab onto mentally in the dizzying terror. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said in a whiny voice. He'd called her a brat, okay, she'd play a brat.

"Then I guess you'll just have to hold it." He sounded calmer now. He didn't take his eyes off the road.

"No, I really have to go *bad*," she said in a shrill, complaining voice. A little more nasal quality? Maybe just a little. "I already had to go when I was going to the trailer. Granpa, I'm gonna wet my *pants*!"

"I told you to shut up," he snapped, but he looked uneasy all the same.

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He must have borrowed the sledcar, and what sledcar owner was going to be thrilled to find the seat had been peed on?

Things seemed to be taking a promising turn, but just then Lexi realized that even if she prevailed, Granpa wasn't going to untie her hands and let her go off into the bushes on her own. He would keep hold of her, and pull her dress up and her pants down himself. He'd claimed that the thought of "loving on her" made him sick, but what if getting into that kind of situation made him change his mind? Lexi felt a thrill of a sicker sort of fear. "I guess I can wait a little while," she said in a sulky voice.

"You do that," said her grandfather, though he looked over at her in a way that made Lexi glad she had changed tactics. "It's not that much fu'ther anyways."

"But this leather thing's really hurting my hands, they're getting numb."

"Like I said, it's not much fu'ther."

At that moment the sound of a helicopter made Lexi's heart leap with hope. Pam might have returned her call by now; by now, everyone would realize she was missing. Maybe that Jaime at Gaian headquarters had called the Salt Lake Police. The only choppers allowed in the air were official ones. The police were probably hunting for her right this minute. She strained around, trying to see, just as the racket got much louder and the chopper suddenly appeared from behind the slope of a mountain.

It wasn't a police helicopter after all. The lettering on the side said THE CHURCH OF EPHREM THE PROPHET. As she was realizing this, Lexi also realized that Granpa was looking up with interest, not concern. In fact the chopper was landing behind some trees above the road, and he was turning the car into the parking area at one of the abandoned picnic sites that used to be popular back when people could take private cars up into the canyons east of Salt Lake.

Lexi's heart plummeted. This wasn't rescue, this was rendezvous. Granpa was handing her over to the Church. He hadn't kidnapped her for some reason of her mother's and his own, he'd done it with the cooperation, maybe even on the orders, of the Church leadership.

Her grandfather quieted the car and came around to pull Lexi out. "Up there," he said tersely, and started pushing her ahead of him, up a trail that wound among derelict picnic tables set on terraces.

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The trail went pretty much straight up the side of the steep canyon. Granpa had to stop partway to catch his breath, holding onto Lexi's arm and bending over to pant. She could probably have wrenched herself loose while he was preoccupied with panting, but there wasn't much point, the terrain was way too rough and her bare feet, toughened though they were by all that traipsing over rough ground while the cameras rolled, would slow her down, even if she could keep her balance with her buzzing hands tied behind her. She would never get away. "If you untied me I could walk by myself," she said anyway.

"Don't make me laugh," he growled. They started up again.

Lexi expected to see Sire Cooper, but the person standing by the chopper was the Canon of her own Parcel, the one who was Granpa's friend, the one who always used to say how wonderful it was that their Parcel had a real family with a real testimony.

Canon Erickson gave Lexi a big smile, then frowned when he saw that her hands were tied. "Was it necessary to truss her up like that, Ed?"

"Trust me," Granpa puffed, very red in the face. "It was necessary. The kid can run like a rabbit."

Canon Erickson leaned over Lexi's bonds. He *tsk*ed sympathetically, and Lexi made a strategic tear slip down her right cheek, already streaked with actual tears. "Oh dear, it's digging into her skin, look. Jared," he said, turning to a person inside the chopper, "will you take a knife and cut this child's hands free?"

"At least put her in there first and lock the doors," Granpa said. "You don't know her like I do, Carl."

The Canon nodded. "All right, Lexi, up you go." The man called Jared swung to the ground, picked her up like a sack of flour, and boosted her onto the helicopter behind the pilot. He climbed in after her and opened a clasp knife, and Lexi's hands were free.

Numb as they were, if she'd still been on the ground she'd have been off like a streak of lightning, Granpa was right. Vividly she saw herself squirm into a hidey-hole in the rocks and crouch low while they lumbered past, kicking at the scrub oak, failing to find her. Later she would tear strips from the dress to wrap and tie around her feet, make a little shelter, stay cleverly hidden until Jaime or Pam could spring into action. There were serviceberries in the mountains this time of year, and plenty of

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water. She had perfect faith that eventually Pam would save her. All she would have to do would be not get caught until that happened.

But it was all useless; she was sealed inside the helicopter and the pilot was making the rotors roar.

Aboard the bullet train from L.A. to Las Vegas and Salt Lake, Pam sat at a table in the concessions car, sipping cider and alternately fretting and scheming. The Nevada desert slipped drearily past her window.

If Lexi was alone in the mountains, she had to be found at once. If the Ephremites were holding her — and this seemed likelier — there was no need to be concerned about her physical safety; but the Church would work on her to renounce the Gaians, and otherwise try to guilt-trip her back into the fold, which they would consider a great PR coup if they could bring it off.

Fiercely Pam determined not to let Lexi be put through deprogramming. She intended to find her fast, with Humphrey's help if necessary. And from now on, however often she would have to encounter the odious RoLayne, Pam intended to play a more active role in Lexi's life. The world as they knew it might be on the verge of changing for everybody, but this one child was not going to be forced to live in constant fear of having her private world turned inside out like a sock if Pam could help it.

As if activated by these thoughts, the TV screen above the forward door of the car crackle-flickered to life — and Pam gasped and half-rose, for there stood Lexi herself, in her Kate dress and sun bonnet and bare feet, arms folded across her chest, looking proud and defiant despite her streaky makeup. As Pam sank back in her seat, a news announcer began reading a report: "CBC-TV has learned that Alexis Allred, eleven-year-old star of the popular television series *A Thousand Miles*, was kidnapped earlier today by agents of the Church of Ephrem the Prophet, commonly known as the Ephremite Church.

"The network received this recording an hour ago from a spokesperson for the Church, which is claiming credit for liberating Alexis from what they term 'the corrupting influence of the Gaian Movement.' Church agents are holding the girl in an undisclosed location and demanding that the Hefn agree to release her officially into Ephremite custody. Here is the actual recording received by this station."

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The still image of Lexi on the screen now began to move. Someone said, in a voice Pam didn't recognize, "Lexi, go ahead now, honey, tell the folks you're all right." The girl glared at the camera and lifted her chin, and Pam's insides weakened at this show of courage. Lexi might be intimidated, even scared to death, but — professional to the core — she wasn't going to let it show. The speaker chuckled. "Alexis doesn't want to tell you herself, but as you can see she's absolutely fine, if a little mad at us right now. We're going to take wonderful care of her. But we're going to keep her tucked away till the Hefn agree to restore her to us for safekeeping, away from the corrupting influence of the Gaian Movement. This child was a wonderful Ephremite girl until just a few months ago, when the Gaians got hold of her and brainwashed her into believing their lies.

"So now, while we're waiting to hear what the Hefn have to say, we'll also be trying our best to undo the evil visited upon this innocent child. Every single child is precious to us, all the more precious now that the aliens have stolen away a whole generation of our children." All the time the unseen speaker was holding forth, Lexi stood very still but her mobile face expertly conveyed her disdain. ("Precious my foot...*what* a load of crapola...you people don't *believe* any of this, do you?") Pam was so proud of her that her eyes prickled.

"We ask for your prayers and support as we endeavor to force these evil creatures to renounce the crime they committed against humanity a generation ago. We demand that they restore our ability to obey the commandment God first gave to Adam and Eve: that they be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth."

The newscaster's face replaced Lexi's on the screen. "CBC has learned that six months ago, the Gaian Mission in Salt Lake City filed a complaint against Alexis Allred's grandfather, on a charge of sexual abuse of a minor. The grandfather, Edgar Carstairs, is a member of the Ephremite Church and a direct descendent of the Prophet Ephrem Carstairs. Since allegations were filed against Mr. Carstairs, Alexis has been under Gaian oversight. *A Thousand Miles*, which is financed and produced by the Ephremite Church, was filming on location in the Wasatch Mountains east of Salt Lake when the child was abducted."

* * *

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4

IT WAS NEARLY midnight when Pam's train pulled into New Jerusalem Square. The light-rail system, TRAX, had stopped running at 11:00, but a few horse cars were still parked at the curb. Pam shouldered her pack, climbed the stairs to the street. Office or home? Home first, then office? Or vice versa? She dithered, staring up at the Ephremite angel, Fortibus, guyed atop the tallest spire of the Cathedral opposite the station.

The Gaians would need to put a public face on their efforts to find Lexi. It would be best to get a statement out tonight. Office then. Pam hailed a horse cab and climbed in.

The night air was delightful; the driver had folded down the top of his cab. As the horse began to clomp forward on its rubber shoes, Pam sat back and studied the angel, bathed in light high above the darker streets. Despite his winglessness he did appear to be in flight, as the figurehead of a ship appears to fly above the waves. From the high vantage of his perch a person might very well be able to see where Lexi was being hidden. The great slab of the Ephremite Office Building dwarfed the Cathedral, spire and all; if they were holding her there — a good possibility — then Lexi might be able to look down on the angel from above. Supposing they ever let her near a window.

"Where to, lady?" said the driver, who sounded Latino.

"The Gaian Mission on Fourth South."

He whistled. "Wouldn't go nowheres near that place if I was you."

"Just take me there, okay?"

Inside the Mission, lamps were lit. Good, dear, faithful, dependable Jaime. Pam climbed out and paid the driver, who got his first good look at her under the street light. "Oh, hokay, you that lady that works for them Hefn. Workin' late tonight, tryin' to fin' that little girl on the telly, now I get it."

Pam hurried up the walk. Jaime jerked the door open before she could finish unlocking it. "Thank God you're back."

"I'm mighty glad to see you too." She shrugged off her pack and collapsed on the couch beside it. "I saw the recording on the train. What have you found out?"

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"Not a freakin' thing! I called the cops right after I talked with you, and they started out looking, but the minute they found out who it was that had her, that was the end of that. The Church is zipped up tight on this one, I worked through the whole list of contacts and nothing, not a peep, nobody's talking." Jaime blew through his lips in frustration. "Want some tea? Cider?"

"Thanks, but I rode all the way back in the café car." Pam rubbed her eyes. "There may only be a handful of people who actually know anything. You have to give them credit, the ones involved are putting their lives on the line. They know the Hefn could mindwipe them for this if it doesn't go their way. Ephremites have never been cowards about their convictions."

"Yeah, well, I think it's pretty cowardly to kidnap a little girl and use her as a hostage," Jaime muttered. "How are the Hefn gonna respond?"

"I doubt they'll respond at all, actually, they're more likely to just act like nothing happened. Or no," she said, "Humphrey's fond of Lexi, he won't leave her in the clutches of the Church. He's coming out in a couple of days. If we haven't found her by then, he'll get out of 'em where she is, and not by negotiating either."

"Well, I'd a hell of a lot rather not wait that long."

Pam nodded. "They'll take care of her, and she won't crack, at least not right away, but she'll be counting on me to get her out of this and I absolutely have to not let her down — I'm with you, I don't want to wait for Humphrey, let's find her *now*." Despite these words Pam yawned and stretched, pulling herself almost horizontal on the couch.

"So, do we issue a statement?"

"We do. That's why I came here straight from the station." Pam heaved herself up and trudged into her office. "Computer on." She plunked into her desk chair. "I like what you said before. How's this: 'Abducting a child to use as a bargaining chip is a cowardly deed. The Ephremite Church, whose history is filled with acts of sacrifice and courage, has betrayed herself today.'"

Jaime dispatched this to the *Salt Lake Tribune* and CBC, then left to bicycle the half mile home. Pam had intended to go home as well, but the couch in her office suddenly seemed to sing a siren song. She scrounged

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her toothbrush out of her luggage, washed the sunblock off her face, flicked off the lights, and crashed.

She slept heavily, done in by the past couple of days. Dream fragments came, went, came again. At dawn, weightless in the pure light, she stood transfixed upon the tallest spire of the New Jerusalem Cathedral and beheld the burning sliver of the sun poised to lift above the Wasatch Range. Birds came to her: finches, sparrows, robins and mallards she had raised or nursed and released, all shining, whirling about her head. Gimpy swooped in and hovered at arm's length before her face, wings beating, strong and whole; and as she stretched forth a finger to touch the russet feathers of her breast the realization struck home: *I'm dreaming! I'm having a lucid dream!*

She had read about this but never experienced it. In a lucid dream you're aware that you're dreaming, you can take the dream wherever you like. *I'll find out where they're keeping Lexi!* she thought at once, and, spreading her wings wide, launched herself into the air. Flanked and buoyed up by the spiraling flock of ducks and songbirds, Pam circled high over the city. *Show me where Lexi is!* she commanded, and was immediately soaring south, the Great Salt Lake to her right and rear, the Wasatch Range and the sunrise to her left. The birds flew with her — silent, even the mallards, except for the stroking of their wings. All together they swept past Point of the Mountain and flew over Orem and then Provo, the silver tracks of TRAX flashing far below.

They went like the wind. The birds stopped weaving in the air and settled into a mixed flock with Pam at the center, holding a flat smooth trajectory, higher and far faster than natural birds can fly. *I hope I don't wake up before we get there,* she thought; but the landscape streamed beneath her and the dream went on.

Pinned to the wall of the office where Pam's body lay asleep was a huge relief map of Utah. Now this map lay spread below her, showing her the green peaks through which she was being guided. Above Spanish Fork, with the tip of Utah Lake in view, the flock turned east of south, leaving the shiny rail tracks and the Salt Lake Valley behind. The terrain abruptly changed; they broke out of the peaks, and now beneath them deep meandering canyons cut through scrubbly mountains, where dark green vegetation grew thickly scattered against a ground of red and yellow-tan.

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A road wound through and they followed that, flying high and fast. Clustered buildings — Price? — flashed by. They were moving even faster now, veering south again, and now the land-map lost definition in a long broad valley vaguely and distantly flanked by ranges, and Pam was aware of little but dizzying speed and the energy of the birds, bearing her up, sweeping her along. Till suddenly there was the tiny twist of a river dead ahead, dirty green within the wrinkled flatness of the valley, and they were speeding down, down, down, circling, swooping low above a line of tall flat-topped pink cliffs and the flash of water to a wider road, a long low building, a child looking up, holding her left hand high in the Gaian salute.

Pam gasped awake. Her legs swung off the couch by themselves, rushed her to the wall and the relief map. "Lights!" Her head was clear as a bell, but she had to prop herself with both hands on the wall while she made sure.

Then she pushed off and spoke to the phone. "How fast can you get over here?" Pam said, when Jaime's puffy, stubbly face appeared onscreen. "I know where she is!"

"Green River?" He peered at the map doubtfully. "How would they get her there from Emigration Canyon? We'd know if they'd taken out their chopper after the news release. They haven't. They probably can't."

"No, they'll lose their chopper now. TRAX to Salina, then overland?"

"Overland how? By public bus? It's less than twenty-four hours since they snatched her." Jaime rubbed his face, making a raspy sound. "They could put a Church car on the train without attracting attention, I guess, they do that all the time, but — look, Boss, tell me again about this dream?"

Pam said, "No matter how many times I tell it, it's not going to sound any more reasonable. I can't even be sure it *was* a dream. I was sound asleep, but...listen, we can talk about it later but right now we have to get down to Green River. Humor me, Jaime. I know that's where she is, even if I can't explain how I know."

Unhappy but resigned, he grumbled, "I'll go along, but I gotta say, it's not like you to do things that don't make sense."

"I know it's not. I agree with every word you've said so far."

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"Well." He paused. "Okay. Here's what we do. We call down to Moab and have Harley send some people up there."

After Salt Lake, the principal Gaian Mission in Utah was in Moab, not far beyond Green River but farther than Pam had flown in her dream. "That's brilliant! Thank God one of us still has their wits about them. Better not mention the dream thing, say we've had a tip, and to check out all the motels that have rows of rooms on one level. Probably an older motel, maybe abandoned."

"Phone on," yelled Jaime, striding toward his own office.

"And tell him to be careful! The Church has staked an awful lot on this."

Jaime sat at his desk and punched a key. "People go back and forth all the time between Green River and Moab on the old rail line through Crescent Junction," he called to Pam. "We can have a posse up there by lunchtime — what the devil's the matter with this phone?"

The problem was an incoming call from Santa Barbara. "If that's Humphrey, put it through to my office." She went in and shut the door, and there on the screen was her favorite Hefn's familiar face, all beard and fuzz. Seeing it, Pam realized she had totally forgotten about the conference and its urgent business; but this had priority now. "Okay if I call you back in five minutes? We're sending out some people to pick up Lexi and we need to get hold of them."

"Lexi has been found?"

"Not yet, but we think we know where she is. I'll explain when I call you back."

"Explain when you see me," said Humphrey, "this evening. I am coming to Salt Lake, as we agreed."

Pam said, "Look, that's great, but I may be tied up with this rescue. You might want to wait a day or two."

Humphrey said calmly, "I do not want to wait a day or two. If you are not at home I will let myself in and wait for you, or I will come and find you."

He was telling, not asking; Pam had to acquiesce. While Jaime called Moab, she stared soberly at the blank screen. But then she heard Harley Kroupa's voice describing how he would organize and move his troops, and rushed into Jaime's office to urge, "Be careful! Don't you guys get captured or we'll have to bust you out of there too."

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"You *sure* they've got her in Green River? Seems like a funny place to pick."

Jaime started to answer but Pam said firmly, "That's what we hear. No guarantees, but it's our best lead, and if there's any chance at all — "

"Gotcha. We'll do our damnedest. An old motel, they said, just a strip of rooms like a train of cars?"

Pam hesitated. "Something like that. Kind of big."

"Might be any of a bunch of 'em. Well, those ones are all on East Main, we'll stake 'em all out."

"Great. If you can bring her back as far as Salina, we'll meet you there. There's a train in an hour and a half."

Jaime cut the connection and swiveled in his chair to look up at Pam. "*We'll* meet you?"

"I will, then. You don't need to come, O thou of little faith; I know you think it's a wild goose chase. You stay and mind the store."

Her own words made her shiver. A wild goose chase indeed.

5

LEXI CAME OUT OF the little bathroom of the swaying bus and made her way back to her place behind the driver, holding onto the other seats to keep her balance.

She was no longer in her *Thousand Miles* getup. Back in the huge bathroom of the house in Little Cottonwood Canyon, where they'd shot that viddy, she had scrubbed off her makeup and changed into her own jeans, T-shirt, socks, and sneakers. Her mother had put these items in a bag for Granpa, and Granpa had given the bag to the Canon after they'd hauled her into the helicopter. There was a sweatshirt too, but she'd taken that off. Even with all the windows open it was warm on the bus.

She'd been sleeping with the seat tilted back as far as it would go, and felt dopey and strange, and now she was hungry. She glanced across the aisle at the young man — Jared — who'd been in the chopper with Canon Erickson, and who'd bundled her onto the train at Midvale while everybody looked the other way. He was reading, a book that looked like *The Sayings of Ephrem*. It went against the grain to ask a kidnapper for any

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favors, but the more she thought about food the harder it got not to. She was mentally practicing "I don't suppose you thought to bring any *food* on this getaway bus," in haughty, disdainful tones, when Jared closed his book, stretched, looked over at Lexi, and said, "How about something to eat?"

"You don't mean to say you actually brought any *food* on this getaway bus," Lexi said in her best withering voice, hoping her relief didn't show.

He grinned. "Sure did. Let's see here." He got up and opened the lid of a cooler on the seat behind him. "Ham and Swiss with lettuce and mayo? Coke?" When she nodded he handed her a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, and a green bottle, then took another sandwich and bottle for himself and slid back into his seat.

Except for the driver, they had the whole big bus to themselves, a shockingly unGaian waste of resources. Lexi couldn't remember getting off TRAX and boarding the bus; she'd slept right through the whole thing and had been sleeping off and on for hours while the three of them roared along through the dark. *I bet they drugged me,* she thought darkly. She'd had tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for dinner on the train. *I bet they put ground-up sleeping pills in that soup. So I wouldn't yell and give them away when we switched to the bus. I would have, too, I would've yelled my head off!*

Now it was morning. They were deep in mountains Lexi didn't recognize, heading toward the sun. She unwrapped the sandwich avidly, wondering who had made it, and twisted the cap off the Coke bottle with CAFFEINE FREE stamped in raised letters right in the glass.

The sandwich was heavenly; Lexi tried not to wolf it but she pretty much did. The Coke was cold and delicious. "Want a cookie?" Jared held a round tin box across the aisle. "Oatmeal raisin?" The cookie was *extremely* good. Lexi ate several more cookies and started to feel a lot better. Cookie by cookie, the dopiness was dissolving out of her head. She stared out the window, wondering where the heck they were taking her.

It couldn't hurt to ask. "Where are we going?" she asked above the roaring of the motor.

"Sorry. Can't tell you that." Jared smiled when he said this, but Lexi could tell he wasn't going to budge.

Would he maybe relent and tell if she sobbed and begged him and

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acted distraught? After watching her gobble a sandwich and seven cookies? Not likely.

Time dragged by, and they were still on the mountain road, not going very fast. She couldn't deduce anything from looking out the windows except that the road was in good shape, so this was a regular bus route, not an unmaintained highway that carried no traffic. Once in a while a vehicle — an ambulance, a recycling lorry, another bus — would pass them going the opposite direction, but all were unrevealing except for the bus, which said SALT LAKE EXPRESS on the front. *That* wasn't very helpful. All the road signs had long since rusted over or disappeared from their posts. Nobody had replaced them. In a world where private cars were forbidden, what was the point of signs?

Lexi leaned her head against the window and thought about Pam. If Pam had been in Salt Lake, instead of Santa Barbara, her mom would never have dared get involved in the kidnapping, not in a million years. Thinking about how her mom had helped Granpa shove her into the sledcar, Lexi's eyes filled up; but she blinked hard and swallowed, and decided to be mad at Pam instead. Pam had no business going to California! Pam was supposed to stay *here*, making sure stuff like this didn't happen, that was her job! Righteous indignation swelled Lexi's chest. She thought about the scathing things she would say to Pam after Pam had rescued her from the kidnappers — *I'm not speaking to you!* — and how sorry Pam would be, how she would apologize over and over and promise never to go away again. This line of thought was deeply satisfying, for a while; but then Lexi remembered sitting at Pam's kitchen table with Pam and Humphrey, all three with big plates of spaghetti in front of them and big red circles around their mouths, and how Humphrey had talked about what Pam used to be like when she first went to the Bureau of Temporal Physics as a kid not much older than Lexi herself, the only girl in the first class of Apprentices, what a gifted mathematician and quick study she'd proved to be, the first Apprentice to learn how to place the numbers in the time transceiver fields, how she used her mind to do this with such beautiful precision. Lexi had seen Pam watching Humphrey while he was explaining all this, she knew what that look meant. Pam loved that weird-looking, hairy old Hefn. When Humphrey ordered her to go somewhere, she had to go. That was her job too, doing what Humphrey said.

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The swaying of the bus was making Lexi drowsy. In spite of herself she dozed off again. Then it was later, and the bus had slowed even more as the driver geared down. Outside were drab-colored flat-topped mountains under puffy, flat-bottomed white clouds. They were coming into a town. Jared had moved over next to her, and one of his big hands had a grip on the back of her neck; that was what had woken her. "Stay right like you are, Alexis. I don't want to hurt you but I will if you try to yell or signal out the window."

Saying this, he pushed her head down nearly to her knees and ducked down beside her. Grinding its gears, the bus moved slowly through the town. From her bent-over position Lexi couldn't see out at all. Being pressed down made her panicky; her heart thumped while she desperately willed herself not to struggle. If she gave in to the panic and started to fight Jared, whose hard breathing was a rasp in her right ear, he would hurt her. He had said he would, and she believed him.

After a few minutes the bus turned right, into what felt like a driveway. It changed directions several times, then stopped.

Jared sat up cautiously and looked out, then took his hand off Lexi's neck. "Okay, Alexis, we're getting off now. Now, what I'm gonna do is, is I'm gonna hold your hands behind your back. Now, don't you make one sound, okay? Not one single sound. Just do like I tell you and you'll be fine. Okay, come on."

He pulled her up and clamped her again, gripping both her wrists together in the same hand that had held her face to her knees. "Ow!" she said — though it was more uncomfortable than painful to be held that way — but all he did was clamp her tighter and hiss: "*What did I tell you*? Not one sound, not a one! Now get going."

He thrust her ahead of him to the front of the bus and down the steep steps. Through the windows she could see that the bus was parked between two identical long, low buildings. As Lexi stepped the last high step down to the ground, she caught a glimpse of deep blue sky and tall pink cliffs that did look a little bit familiar, and thought, *I bet we're somewhere near the parks*. The driver had maneuvered the bus so that the door was only a stride away from a door in one of the long buildings, which Jared now opened with his free hand. He started to push her inside —

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— and let out a startled yelp, and Lexi was jerked backwards. She hit the ground on her left side, hard, hard enough to knock the wind out. While she fought to breathe there was a commotion overhead — scuffling — the thwacking sounds of a fistfight, also the sound of the bus roaring and screeching away.

She got her breath back finally and tried to roll onto her hands and knees, but something was wrong with her left hand. She heard herself yell. Then a woman was helping her up, saying "Are you okay, Alexis?"

"Something's wrong with my arm," said Lexi. A few feet away, a group of people she'd never seen before were holding onto Jared. One of them had Jared's arm bent behind him in a way that looked to Lexi like it must hurt. Abruptly, humiliatingly, she threw up.

The woman examining her arm was unperturbed. "Looks like you broke your wrist when you fell on it. Ever had a broken bone before?" Lexi shook her head, feeling extremely strange. A moment later she was lying on the ground again. "Keep still, honey. You fainted. We need to get you to a doctor."

Somebody brought her some water. In a little bit somebody else helped her stand up again, and held her up while the woman arranged her arm in a makeshift sling. "We'd better get you down to Moab, the medical facilities are a lot better down there."

The sling helped. "Where's Pam?" said Lexi. Not for an instant did she doubt who had brought about her rescue.

The man who had helped her stand the second time said, "Pam's on her way to Salina. The plan was for us to meet up at Salina, and she'd take you back up to Salt Lake. I'm Harley Kroupa, by the way — I'm sachem of the Moab Mission."

"The Gaian Mission?"

"That's the one." His grin made his mustache wiggle.

Lexi managed to smile back. "Where are we? What's this place?"

"This is Green River," said Harley Kroupa.

"Oh. I was here one time. We went rafting. Oh, so that's the Book Cliffs then." She glared at Jared, wilted and sullen in the custody of the victorious Gaians, and back at Harley. "Is Pam coming to Moab too?"

"We'll have to see. Let's us get over there and get Jaime on the phone; I expect he'll know how to reach her. And you might as well let this fellow

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go," he told the man who was holding Jared in a half-nelson. "Let him get on back to Salt Lake whatever way he can. I expect he'll be wanting to speak to the First Minister of the Church."

The Gaians all laughed, and the man holding Jared turned him loose. Jared worked his shoulders and looked down at Lexi. "Listen, I'm sorry you got hurt, Alexis. If these goons hadn't of interfered, not a thing would've happened, you'da been fine."

"When you were holding my head down," Lexi said, "I wasn't fine. I wasn't fine *at all*. I bet the Hefn are going to mindwipe you and I hope they do."

6

THERE WAS NO FASTER WAY to get from Salina to Green River than the way Lexi and Jared had come, but at least the twice-weekly public bus continued on to Moab. Harley Kroupa met Pam at the station, a converted film lab. "Great to see you," he said, shaking hands vigorously. "They pinned her wrist this morning. She's sleeping off the sedative. She wouldn't settle down last night till we told her you were on your way." He shouldered Pam's backpack. "The Mission's just a couple blocks along here."

They started walking, past a cluster of small gift and snack shops with CLOSED TILL SEPTEMBER 15 signs in their windows. Hot as it was in Salt Lake, here it was hotter; dry as it was, Pam could feel the sweat pop out on her back. The wide sunwashed street was all but deserted. In the rush to leave Pam had forgotten her hat, and the ferocious light stabbed her eyes. Shading them with her hand, she asked, "How bad is the wrist?"

"Not very, just a hairline fracture. She'll be fine, but I reckon they might have to write her out of the series for a while."

She smiled. "That won't do the series any harm. Nothing's better for telly ratings than a little notoriety. So Jaime tells me."

Harley laughed. "That Jaime is a character." Pam smiled at him, a lean, weathered man with a drooping mustache, in jeans and boots and a ten-gallon hat. They had conferred often by phone; this didn't feel like a first meeting. "Well now," he said, "we've been wantin' to get you down

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here for a good while. Not quite what we had in mind. You've never been to Moab at all before, have you."

"No," said Pam, "and I've always wanted to, especially after I read that Edward Abbey memoir, *Desert Solitaire*." Harley grinned, nodding enthusiastically. "I'd love to see Delicate Arch, the bus went right past the entrance to the park, but I don't suppose there'll be time for that on this trip."

Harley shoved his big hat to the back of his head and squinted at the scenery. "Reckon not, but I hope you'll make it down again soon, now that you've had a glimpse of the country hereabouts."

"I hope so too," Pam said, meaning it. "So the rescue went off without a hitch, apart from Lexi's wrist?"

Harley ducked his head and looked sober. "We all feel mighty bad about that, Pam. I keep going over and over it, wondering if there wasn't some way we could have grabbed him without her gettin' knocked down."

"Well," said Pam — speaking in her role as Gaian Child Welfare Oversight Officer, as well as her other role as Bureau Emissary to the Church of Ephrem the Prophet — "I won't deny it would have been better to pull it off without anybody getting hurt, and especially without the hurt person being Lexi. Besides the effect on her, it gives the Church a stick to beat us with. But you got her out, and I don't doubt you did the best you could in the circumstances, and neither will Humphrey, I'm sure. So, apart from the wrist, things went smoothly?"

Harley looked relieved. "Slick as a zipper — see, Green River's a pretty dead town most of the year. The town center's basically moved down around the newer motels, there's several of 'em down there on the Green, right where they launch the rafts, right across from the river museum. Plus the bus stop, the bank, the farmer's market, and so forth...but the train station's in the old downtown. Well, and the Ephremite church, that's the only church in town of course. Well this time of year there's nobody around as a rule if it's not Sunday, but if somebody happens to see a group of people gettin' off the train it looks suspicious. So we're keepin' our heads down and checkin' up and down the street, there's several derelict motels on East Main. Well, so, we're checkin' out the ones like Jaime described and talking about what to do, and while we're doin' that we see this bus pull in at the old Book Cliff Lodge — that one's got two parallel rows of rooms, two buildings you know, one directly behind the

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other, and of course that means there's space between 'em to park a bus out of sight of the street."

Pam, who had been nodding encouragement throughout Harley's narrative, thought: *That's it. That's what I missed.*

"So soon as they drive behind the streetside building, all eight of us just hightail it across the street, and the minute they get off we jump the guy that's holding Lexi." He shook his head ruefully. "And down he goes, and down she goes too."

"You couldn't have known she'd be on the bus," Pam said reasonably. "Actually, I can't imagine why they'd risk taking her out again — or taking the bus out again, for that matter, once they'd made it here without getting caught."

Harley shot her a surprised look; but they had arrived. "Well, here we are, this is the Mission." Harley held a door open and Pam stepped ahead of him into the dim relief of a swamp cooler's breeze. Two women stood up from desks as they entered. "Pam Pruitt, this is Mercedes Landrum, my assistant — my gal Jaime, so to speak. She was in the very first class of missionaries to be recruited in Utah." He waited for them to shake hands. "And this young lady is Sophie Rodriguez, she's a volunteer at the mission, she was along on the raid. She's the one who took care of Lexi."

Sophie shook hands with Pam too. "I've had some medical training so I volunteered. They were mighty glad they let me come!"

"It's not a bad break," the other woman put in. "Sophie did the X-rays herself."

"We all feel bad about it though. We know the Church will make hay out of it."

Again Pam went through her acknowledgment/reassurance routine: Yes, it's a pity; no, nobody blames you; don't worry, we'll deal with it. "I'd like to see her as soon as possible. Right away, if the doctors don't object."

"I can take you to the clinic now," Harley offered. "You can leave your stuff in the guest room and freshen up if you like, and you can use Mercedes's bike. The clinic's about a mile from here, you passed it on the bus coming in. Several of our guys are standing guard. They wanted to do something to make up for letting her get hurt."

Pam nodded; it was a good idea. Her eyes had adjusted to the low light in the room, and she saw now that the walls were covered with monstrous

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attenuated figures, obviously primitive, very striking, rather disturbing in fact. The figures had the massive stillness of Easter Island heads. "Would this be the local rock art?"

"Some of it, and fairly local," said Harley. "These come from the Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon. They're thousands of years old. Mercedes is a pictograph expert, among her other virtues; she put these posters up."

"It's awesome art," Mercedes said. "We're not the first ones by a long shot to have lived into this land. The people who made these paintings were proto-Gaians for sure."

More posters plastered the clinic walls, some of rock art in different styles, some of stunningly gorgeous scenery from inside the National Parks. All the rock seemed to be dark red, or red and white, or red-gold and glowing in hard sunlight. The painted figures were dark red. Pam noticed a big picture of Delicate Arch in winter, red rock against white snow.

Lexi was still asleep but the nurse in charge said she should be waking up any time now, and it was perfectly okay for Pam to wait in the room.

"I'd like to be alone with her when she wakes up," Pam told Harley. "Thanks for the escort."

"Sure thing," said Harley. "See you back at the Mission for dinner, then?"

"I'll let you know. Probably." She turned to enter Lexi's room.

"Oh, and by the way," he added, "you were saying about how we couldn't have known Lexi would be on that bus? I didn't get a chance to explain — they were only just pulling in from Salina when we got there. We only beat them to Green River by a couple of minutes."

Pam turned back. "I thought they got there the night before, the night of the day they kidnapped her."

He shook his head. "Nope, not till yesterday afternoon. From what Jaime'd said we thought they'd be there already too, but they were only just hittin' town, and if you think about it, they really couldn't have gotten there very much faster. If they holed up somewhere close to Salt Lake to make that viddy, and then had to wait for a train, get a car put on, locate a bus to charter from Salina — you just got off one so you know yourself how long it takes an electric bus to get up and down those mountain roads,

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they only average about twenty-five or thirty. And there's not that many trains that come this far south either nowadays. We can check the schedule, but I'm pretty sure they got there about as fast as humanly possible."

He was obviously correct. "Of course you're right. I must've put in an extra day somehow."

"Not much wonder, with everything that's been going on. See you later, then. Hope the little girl's doin' okay."

The room held six white hospital beds, five of which were made up flat. Pam went in quietly and shut the door behind her. Lexi lay in the bed closest to the door. Its head had been elevated, and Lexi's long blond hair lay loosely mussed over the pillow. Her left arm was swathed in a white sling with an ice pack tucked inside it, and there was an IV line taped to the back of her right hand. The line led from a beeping bottle of fluid hooked to a pole.

Lexi looked little and pale in all that whiteness. The sight of her struck a blow to Pam's solar plexus that felt physical. Carefully she drew up a chair and sat in it. She watched the child's sleeping profile while trying to grapple with the implications of what Harley had just said: that if Lexi had arrived in Green River at the same time the posse did — then the lucid dream had showed Pam, not where Lexi was, but where she was *going to be* some eight hours afterwards.

She pondered this. After a bit, she reached over and slid her hand, very carefully, beneath Lexi's left hand where it was sticking out of the cast. She closed her fingers lightly around it and sat back.

Considered from the perspective of an ordinary person, remote viewing combined with precognition might seem not much more remarkable than setting time transceiver coordinates mentally while in a self-induced state of trance. But several dozen Bureau of Temporal Physics Apprentices from successive classes had been operating transceivers that way since they were children. For those with native talent, it was a teachable and learnable skill. Pam didn't understand how her mind interlaced with the transceiver field, any more than she understood how her computer did what it did. But both were familiar, part of her frame of reference.

Whatever had happened in the dream was neither. State your request;

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be instantly swept up and carried like a cork on a mighty swell of energy. No devices, no crystal balls or mirrors, yarrow stalks or Ouija boards, nothing like that. Nothing like the complex technology of the transceivers. Just a dream. She conjured up the moment of descent toward the long, low, double building where Lexi stood holding up her hand — this hand, the broken one — and shivered.

Had Lexi known where they were taking her, had Pam read her mind somehow? Some kind of psychic thing? Psychics who could do remote viewing sometimes helped with police work. Even that, wild though it seemed, would have been easier for Pam to accept than that she had somehow seen into the future.

Though if Time were truly One, as the Hefn were always insisting, didn't it follow that the future is just as "there" as the past and just as available to be looked at, if you knew how to look? Pam was seized by a craving for information. Studies had been done on precognition, she'd seen them referred to, somewhere, sometime. But having been involved so intensely for so long with the past, Pam's imagination had never before been quickened by the idea of the future. The future was the disaster the Gaians were fighting to head off.

Then the hand lying weightless in hers moved, and Lexi stirred, gasped a little, opened her eyes and saw Pam. As her lids fluttered shut again, she smiled and murmured, "I knew you'd come."

"She's fine physically," Pam told Harley Kroupa on the nurse's phone, "but she's pretty upset about everything that's happened to her. She doesn't want me to leave, so I guess I'll stay here with her tonight, and then we'll start back in the morning on the early bus."

Harley barely heard her out. "Understood. Listen, Jaime called; I was just about to call you. He wants you to get back to him asap." Harley paused dramatically. "*The Hefn Humphrey* is on his way to Moab! He wants you to wait for him. He came to Salt Lake — well, maybe I should let Jaime tell you himself."

This was a poser. "He's coming here? Did Jaime say why?"

"No, just that he seemed really determined about it. He'll be here — well — any time now I guess, he's taking a helicopter from Salt Lake. Will he come to the Mission, do you think?" Harley's droopy face was flushed

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and transformed with excitement; the Gaian rank-and-file almost never got to see the founder of their movement in the flesh.

"He'll probably land in the middle of Main Street and wait for the Mission to come to him," Pam said drily. "Oh God. Okay, I'll call my office. When he shows up, please tell him I have to stay here with Lexi, but that he's very welcome to join us. And maybe you could send us in some dinner? I'm sorry, there seems to be a lot going on at once."

"Sure, we'll rustle you up some dinner, I'll bring it over myself, bring your backpack too. Is Humphrey — is he partial to anything in particular?"

"Cobbler," Pam said. "Blackberry cobbler. I don't expect you can produce one of those just like that. Lexi and I aren't finicky, but we're both pretty hungry."

"I'll see what I can do."

He rang off, and Pam put through the call to Jaime, who flashed onto the screen with both eyebrows raised. "I take it all back, boss," he said. "You're a magician and I'll never second-guess you again."

"Good God, don't say that! I'll have to fire you and find somebody else to keep me in line!"

He grinned. "So, Harley says she'll be okay?"

"Completely okay medically, it's just a hairline fracture, but she's got some PTSD. Anxious, doesn't want me out of her sight, refuses to see her mother — RoLayne and Ed Carstairs and the Canon of Lexi's Parcel were all in on the abduction. I'll brief you on the details, but anyhow something's got to be decided about custody right away, she can't go home. What's all this about Humphrey, though?"

"He turned up here around one-thirty. He'd flown in from Santa Barbara and didn't bother to call first. I didn't say anything about your dream, I just explained the situation — said you'd probably bring Lexi back up here tomorrow, and did he want to make himself at home at your place till then, and he said, honest to God, he said 'I will not wait at Pam Pruitt's house if Pam Pruitt is in Moab. I will go to directly to Moab. I will not pass Go. I will not collect two hundred dollars.' Where did Humphrey learn to play Monopoly?"

"Oh, we used to play board games a lot at the BTP. He loved all those corny old ones like Monopoly and Clue."

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"After that I heard a chopper take off about, oh, two hours ago? I assumed it was him, coming straight there."

"It was," said Pam, "I hear the chopper now. Did he say what was so urgent it couldn't wait?"

"Nope. Maybe he's always wanted to see Delicate Arch."

Pam groaned. "Okay, let's focus on the custody question. Lexi's got aunts and uncles in Salt Lake and Ogden, but they're all Ephremites and she doesn't want anything to do with Ephremites right now. She hasn't come right out and said so, but I know what she really wants is to stay with me. And that's fine, for a while, but if she's going to keep acting in *A Thousand Miles* when she's better, she's going to need two things: a different responsible adult on location, and a full-time non-Ephremite bodyguard. Can you get rolling on all that?"

Jaime's mouth twisted sideways. "Hmm. Custody and bodyguard I can do. Responsible adult, I don't know. What about her dad, could he take over for RoLayne?"

Pam realized she knew nothing whatever about Lexi's father, not even his first name. "It's a thought, but I'd better ask Lexi how she likes that idea. He's her dad, but he's an Ephremite too; Ed Carstairs is his stepfather. Hold off on that one, I guess. Have you called Marcee?"

"Yesterday afternoon, soon's I knew something to tell her. The writers are already beavering away on a script about Kate's broken arm. Bit ghoulish, don't you think?"

Pam grinned. "I guess that's show biz. See you tomorrow then."

She cut the connection, apologized to the nurse, whose name tag read MRS JACKSON, for keeping the phone tied up so long, and went back into Lexi's room. The patient was sitting up in bed; she'd taken her arm out of the sling and was examining her cast. "Dinner's on the way," Pam said, "and guess what else is on the way? Humphrey! Did you hear the helicopter?"

Lexi nodded, beginning to smile. "Was that him? Cool! Why is he here though?"

"Jaime wasn't sure. Maybe he'll tell us himself. How do you feel? Want to get dressed before he gets here?"

"Can I?"

"I don't see why not, if we can get the nurse to take your IV out."

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Mrs. Jackson called the doctor, then came in and disconnected Lexi from her drip. The bandage she plastered over the insertion point had yellow ducklings on it, and Lexi slid her eyes sideways at Pam, saying more plainly than words, *What does she think I am, a baby?*

Pam grinned behind the nurse's departing back. "Where's your stuff?"

She didn't know, but Pam opened the locker door and there were Lexi's jeans and T-shirt on hooks, and her socks and sneakers on the floor. "I had a sweat shirt too but I guess it's still on that bus."

"Hmm." Pam took the T-shirt down and considered it. "Let's see if this'll go on over your cast. Did I ever tell you I broke my arm when I was about your age? I remember what a hassle it was, trying to get stuff on over my head by myself."

"How'd you break yours?"

"Falling out of a tree." She sat down on the bed and untied Lexi's hospital gown. The shirt went over the cast without difficulty, then over the other arm and head. Lexi tugged her hair free and pulled on her own jeans one-handedly, sitting on a chair to do it, but Pam had to button the waistband. Lexi did the socks and shoes herself and Pam tied the laces. "Teamwork is the answer. You'll get better at doing things for yourself, though. Since you're right-handed it's good it was your left wrist you broke."

The doctor, large brown envelope tucked under her arm, knocked and came in as Pam was brushing the tangles out of Lexi's hair. When Lexi introduced her to Pam she added proudly, "Dr. Boniface is a *Gaian*!"

"I am indeed, and it's a great pleasure to meet you, Ms. Pruitt."

"It's a great pleasure for me," said Pam, "to meet the person who fixed up my girl here." She shook the doctor's hand. "Would you care to stick around and meet the Hefn Humphrey? He's rumored to be headed this way."

"It's more than a rumor. Harley called me a couple of minutes ago. They were leaving as soon as Sophie'd finished hitching up the team. Sounds like they're bringing enough food to feed a regiment."

"Dollars to doughnuts Humphrey will be driving by the time they get here," said Pam. "Anything I should know about Lexi's wrist? We're leaving in the morning."

Dr. Boniface laid the envelope on the bed. "These are her X-rays.

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The Salt Lake orthopedist will want to see them. Lexi, your cast comes off in five or six weeks, then they'll give you a splint, that'll make things easier. Keep the sling on till then, okay?"

Lexi nodded. A small commotion outside had been growing louder as the doctor spoke. "Here comes dinner," Pam said.

Dr. Boniface peered out the window. "And every Gaian in Moab."

The door of the clinic burst open. Lexi bounced on her bed with excitement, then bounced out of it as Pam hurried into the reception area.

One of the truly endearing things about Humphrey was the way he gave himself up completely to simple pleasures. "*Hello*, my dear! Look, I am a driver of horses! Harley Kroupa gave me a lesson and put the reins into my hands! We *trotted*! It is very, very — it is very — *delightful* — to drive a team of horses!" He was literally wriggling with delight. "And hello to you also, dear little Lexi! Like you, I am now a driver of horses! Do you also find it very wonderful?"

Lexi, who'd been hovering in the doorway of her room, now came out and leaned against Pam. "Hi, Humphrey. I do find it lots of fun, I wish I got to do it more."

"On *A Thousand Miles*," Humphrey explained to the gathered Gaians, who doubtless already knew this as well as he did, "Kate McPherson had once to drive horses and a supply wagon through the North Platte River. I had *no idea* how delightful this could be." He made a visible effort to calm himself down. "How are you feeling this evening, little dear? I am very sorry about your broken bone."

"It's only a hairline fracture," Lexi told him; she'd been hearing people say that since yesterday. "It kind of hurts though."

Pam supported the arm and pulled the sling out of the way. "It's swollen. Better get that ice pack back on it. Can she have something for pain?" she asked Mrs. Jackson, who was standing at her station taking in the show.

Susan Boniface, who had come out to see it as well, said, "I'll take care of it. Come along, Lexi," and they ducked back into the room.

Harley and the other Gaians had by now crowded into the reception behind Humphrey, carrying covered dishes, picnic baskets, and coolers. The space filled up with good smells. "Here's what we'll do," said Pam. "Lexi and I will entertain Humphrey in Lexi's room, but there's enough

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food here for an Irish wake. Why don't you folks put those dishes on the nurse's station and have a potluck out here — if that's okay with you?" she asked the nurse, who nodded happily; things were obviously not this lively at the clinic as a rule. "Thanks. We'll all help clean up."

"Here's Humphrey's cobbler," said Mercedes, the "gal Jaime" from the Mission. "You can just take that in with you. He had the most wonderful time driving over here."

It really was a blackberry cobbler, still warm. Pam looked up from its purple surface with amazed gratitude. "How — "

"I had one left in the freezer, from last summer. Humphrey is more than welcome to it. They're almost ripe again anyway."

7

"THE GREAT THING about so many Utah Gaians being ex-Ephremites," Pam told him later, after everyone had gone home and Lexi had dropped off to sleep, "is that they can put on a first-rate potluck at the drop of a hat. Having to eat hunkered on the floor, out of sick-up basins with tongue depressors, just made it that much more of an adventure for them. The morale of the Moab Mission will probably never be higher than it is right now."

Pam was seated in the bedside straight chair, Humphrey folded up on the bed next to Lexi's — straight chairs were just about impossible for him — clutching the round glass cobbler dish to his rough, hairy torso and a serving spoon in one of his forked hands. He had shared this treat with Lexi and Pam, but had eaten two-thirds of it himself, and now from time to time he scraped the spoon around the sides and scooped off the scrapings with his lower lip. "The Gaians of Moab have cause to celebrate without ceasing," he said mildly. "This land they have lived into, this is a place where Gaia shows herself without equivocation. This is the true Jerusalem and well they know it." Humphrey gave the bowl a final scrape-scoop and set it on the bed beside him. "How were you able to find Lexi Allred?"

Pam took her time describing the lucid dream. "Lexi didn't know where they were taking her," she finished. "She asked the guy in charge of her on the bus that very question but he wouldn't say. *He* knew, the

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Canon knew, RoLayne thought she knew. Lexi didn't know. So either I read one of their minds in my sleep, or I somehow saw a little way into the future, or — what?"

She'd been watching Lexi snooze while telling the story of the rescue, but now at a sudden movement she glanced up. Humphrey was standing on the bed. All his body hair bristled straight out. His large flat eyes were trained on Pam. "What is it?" she said again, and stood herself.

Humphrey made a noise she had never heard any Hefn make in all her years among them, a high gargling sound, shockingly alien. His arms whirled in circles. In her own bed Lexi started awake. "What's the matter? What happened?" she asked in a frightened voice.

Pam shot Humphrey a warning look. "Nothing's the matter, honey. Humphrey just got carried away about something and forget to be quiet. Everything's fine, go back to sleep."

"Nothing is wrong, little Lexi," Humphrey said in a high, strangled voice. "Everything is right. Everything is wonderful!" As an afterthought he sat down.

Of course Lexi didn't go back to sleep. Her arm hurt, she needed more ice, she needed more pills and a drink; what she needed more than anything was for Pam to pull her sheets straight, tuck her in, and generally reassure her. When her eyelids finally fluttered shut and her breathing was even, Pam turned back to Humphrey, ready to remind him to keep his voice down; but the Hefn had become calm. His hair was flatter, and he held both hands up in front of him, a gesture of placation. He spoke in a rusty whisper. "I will be quiet, my dear, I will not forget again. Yet what you tell me fills me with joy. For out of crisis has come this transformation." He slid to the floor and beamed at her across sleeping Lexi.

The extremeness of his behavior made Pam uneasy. "Aren't you overreacting? I wouldn't call one precognitive dream a transformation." Though come to that, the certainty back in Santa Barbara about who Lexi's kidnappers were, the way her consciousness had expanded, become a lens of power — if that and the dream were linked somehow —

"*You* would not call it one, because you do not know." Humphrey's pelt had begun to erect again. "Behold, I show you a mystery! That is from First Corinthians. Come." Spinning round, he walked briskly through the doorway and directly up to one of the posters on the wall.

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Pam followed and stood beside him. The poster displayed two long, static red figures, different from, but also similar to, those she had seen in the Moab Mission. The figure on the left had a flattened head with huge goggle eyes and skinny arms held akimbo; it looked much more like a spaceman, in point of fact, than Humphrey did. The one on the right also had skinny arms, but its head was small and surmounted with what appeared to be a pair of rabbit ears or two upright, feathery antennae; and around these structures a group of insects or tiny birds formed a kind of vertical halo. "Look, my dear. Do you see the little birds? This is a shaman figure. Do you know what a shaman is?"

"Um — a kind of sorcerer, a medicine man?"

"In traditional human cultures, a shaman is a person who travels on behalf of his people into the spirit world. He enters the spirit world in a variety of ways. Some of the ways, such as fasting, purging, going without sleep, and eating vile-tasting substances, are quite disagreeable, but many shamans have no other means of getting out of their physical bodies. They must do this if they are to seek a cure for an illness or an advantage in warfare. It is difficult and dangerous, but carries high prestige."

Pam looked at Humphrey in amazement. "How the dickens do you come to know all that? I wouldn't have thought it was in your line, so to speak."

"A very common reason for entering the spirit world is to find what has been lost. Valuable objects. *Missing persons!* Shamans also achieve entry in ways that are less unpleasant than purging or ingesting peyote buttons. Drumming, for instance, can effect the separation. Also, some of the most powerful shamans are known to be strong dreamers."

Pam stared at him, then back at the poster. Her heart began to thump in her chest. "These pictures are thousands of years old," she protested.

"This painted shaman does not portray *your* experience specifically, my dear." He trotted to the nurse's station and did some things to the computer, while Pam continued to stare at the unnerving rabbit-eared figure with its bird halo. "But these shamans of a different ancient culture," he said a moment later, "do." He turned the screen so Pam could see.

It was another pictograph, done in a different style. Against a whitish, uneven surface Pam made out a pair of shapes like identical red sausages,

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each with four stick limbs, placed horizontally at the center of the screen. Each arm and leg terminated in a three-toed bird's foot.

Sausages or not, stick limbs or not, there was nothing Easter Island-like about these figures. That they were in flight was unmistakable, partly owing to the fact that above and below them, and oriented in the same direction, a flock of birds was flying. These were no tiny creatures swarming like gnats around an immobile spaceman's antennae. Relative to the sausage figures these birds were large, and there were a lot of them — ten — and though they had been painted crudely, the arrangement was extremely dynamic. The shamans flew across the rock wall and the birds flew with them, supporting them, guiding them — Pam stepped to the station and leaned on it; her ears had begun to ring.

There was writing on the screen, a caption: "Escort Birds of Fate Bell." Below the label Pam read: "In this rare scene from Fate Bell Shelter, ten birds flank two flying shaman figures, illustrating their role as psychopomps or guardian spirits during the shamanic voyage of the soul."

What the Sam Hill was a psychopomp? Wordlessly she looked at Humphrey, who said, "The people who made these pictures, called the Pecos River culture, lived in western Texas perhaps three thousand years ago, at approximately the same time the people in these reproductions on the walls were living here in Utah.

"Despite the distances involved, the rock paintings of the two cultures are amazingly alike in many respects. Not in how they are painted, but in what they depict. No one is able to explain this likeness satisfactorily, or explain why it should be shared by one other culture in Baja California, and by no others in between or elsewhere.

"But in one way — one thrilling way! — the Pecos River people were unique." He punched some keys, and a different picture flashed on the screen: a weathered oval figure outlined in red. The interior of its torso had been painted black, with red and yellow markings. Strikingly, the torso and outspread limbs were heavily fringed in red, giving it somewhat the aspect of a paramecium with arms. Even more strikingly, the figure was headless. Two straight red lines jutted up from the neck region and two other lines crossed them at the tips; to Pam it looked rather like a child's drawing of a trolley car. The caption said: "FANTASTIC CREATURES, THE DART-HEADED FIGURES. Invariably, these

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creatures can be identified by the parallel lines crossed by one or two bars that substitute for its head. The cross bars often bear an oval motif that designates them as a sign for dart or lance. Some part of the body is hairy, whether just the appendages or the entire torso...this mythical creature is so consistent and common, it must represent a well-known actor in the Pecos River cosmological cast whose role in some way informed the audience, but the intent of this morality play is no longer evident."

Now Humphrey was making different versions of the monstrous creature flick on the computer screen. There seemed to be quite a few of them. "Dart-headed figure, Devils River." "Dart-headed figure, Pecos River." "Dart-headed figures, Panther Cave." The figures had plainly been rendered by many different hands, but virtually all were fringed in dark red, as if tricked out in Daniel Boone buckskins.

Pam wanted to get back to the escort birds, but Humphrey kept methodically displaying pictographs of the hairy headless beings. Quelling her impatience, she said, "These look powerful, but creepy. What's the fringe, is it static electricity?"

"No," said Humphrey, and waited. After a bit Pam looked up from the screen. All his body hair was erected. As she stared, he raised his stumpy arms to the sides and she knew at once what he was going to say.

He said it. "They dreamed us."

"They — "

"Dreamed us. Three thousand years ago, the Pecos River people dreamed the Hefn."

Pam stared at him, then at the screen. "The heads — the heads are *weapons*. Thought control — hypnotic suggestion. Memory excision?"

"Yes."

"That's — no, wait, wait a minute." She backed off, waving her arms as if to drive the thought away. "How can you know that? These could be anything, you can't be sure they're Hefn! Unless there was a contact you never happened to mention, three thousand years ago!"

Humphrey bent his body and perched on the nurse's desk chair. "I came across the pictures by sheerest chance, in California, in a book. When I saw them, I knew. No: when I saw them in the book, I *believed*. Then I saw these ancient images painted on the living rock with my own

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eyes, and then I did know. As you knew the Ephremites had stolen Lexi, I knew this."

"That they dreamed the Hefn. Three thousand years ago." Pam reached for a chair and sat in it.

"Last February, when I was coming to see you in Salt Lake," he said, "I made a detour. I went to Texas. Del Rio, Texas. There is no airfield. I was driven to Del Rio from Austin, Texas, in an ambulance, by a rock art expert who does not remember what he did that day."

As always, Pam winced at this allusion to casual mindwipe — of Humphrey erasing a day out of somebody's life to satisfy his curiosity. She pushed the reaction away. "Did you take a transceiver?"

He twisted, a Hefn shrug. "What would be the point? We open a window, we observe a shaman painting a 'dart-headed figure' on a cave wall. What would this reveal to us? If he told stories about these figures, we would not understand what he was saying. As you observe, the figures could be anything. But they are not," said Humphrey fiercely, "'anything'!"

"Before I say one more word," Pam said, "I want to know if I'm going to remember this conversation."

The Hefn conveyed shock. "How can you ask me this?"

Pam thought of the hapless rock-art expert from Austin. "How can I not? Look what you're showing me!"

Humphrey's flat eyes turned on Pam. "Have you understood nothing then, my dear? That everything is different now?"

Pam stared back. "Why is everything different?"

"Because," said Humphrey, "the Hefn do not dream the future. The Hefn do not dream at all! Using a piece of finely calibrated equipment, and our mental abilities, we look into the past. But you, Pam Pruitt, one of our own from childhood, with no equipment of any sort, have dreamed an event before it occurred. Like the shamans of old, you have looked into the future."

"Not very far into the future," Pam protested lamely. "A few hours, maybe half a day."

Humphrey hit another key and the image of a dart-headed figure flipped back onscreen. "These humans saw *three millennia* into the future. You are a Temporal Physics Apprentice, a mathematician, you understand the

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behavior of irrational numbers and nonlinear equations. You understand how chaos overwhelms every attempt to predict the future mathematically. But Time is One! Like the shamans of old, you have overleapt the predictive models, you have *seen what will be!*" As he spoke Humphrey had been tapping more keys; and now four figures shaped like bullets with arms and legs soared up the face of a cliff, trailed by a horizontal line of five large ducklike birds with outspread wings. The caption read, "Birds and anthropomorphic figures rising from a sawtooth horizon at Rio Grande Cliffs, Texas. Copy. Original inundated after the construction of Armistad Reservoir."

More escort birds, drowned ones. Pam shivered; way beyond freaky though it was, she was frankly mesmerized. Another tap, and still another image: "Rotund shaman rising in a cloud of birds. Halo Shelter on Devils River." Tingling excitement surged through Pam, a thrill of focussed energy; she was frankly dying to know more. "These are all in Texas?"

"Yes. But many, many rock paintings and petroglyphs from many, many ancient cultures depict birds and shamans," Humphrey informed her. "Everywhere, birds are seen as symbolic of the flight of the human soul from the body, into the spirit world. I have delved deep into the subject of shamanism since my visit to Texas."

"Whoa," said Pam. "We're getting pretty far into a belief system I haven't got anymore, when we start talking about the human soul and the spirit world."

Humphrey twinkled for the first time since catching a whiff of the approaching cobbler. "It would appear to be unnecessary for the individual to embrace the belief system, if the belief system has decided to embrace the individual." But then he spoke in dead earnest. "You also, Pam Pruitt, must now delve deep into the subject of shamanism. Also into the subject of precognitive dreaming, which is the same subject *au fond.* At bottom. These matters were studied intensively by anthropologists and neurologists, before the coming of the Hefn. There is a very great deal for you to learn, whole libraries of information!"

"Look," said Pam, "I'll do it, I guess I want to anyway, but I wouldn't get my hopes up, I mean I wouldn't count on this being any help with the Homestead problem. It might be just something personal to me."

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"Nevertheless I *shall* hope," he said fervently. "It may be our best hope. It may be all the hope we have!"

Her thoughts went racing ahead. "Then what if I just" — she realized as she said it how good this sounded — "drop out for a while? Just go away and start learning? Jaime can take over in Salt Lake, he's ready for that."

Humphrey never skipped a beat. "Will you go to Kentucky?"

"Texas first. Then Kentucky." Her personal Ground: perfect. "I'd rather nobody knew for now. We can say I'm making a retreat, brainstorming about Homeland. Not that far from the truth."

He "nodded." "A good provisional plan. I think you are right to tell no one. Telling could dilute the force at work in you."

Pam nodded with him. The mystery of what her mind was developing into now begged to be solved; solve that, and the answer might bear upon the conundrum of what lay in the future for humanity and their alien overseers. That was what Humphrey obviously believed, and really he had a point. Two decades spent mining the past had not resolved the conflict; if it were possible, why *not* seek a solution in the future, where ancient Pecos River shamans had encountered the Hefn three thousand years ago?

Then with a jolt she remembered. "Uh-oh — what about Lexi? I told Jaime to get custody papers ready for me to sign as soon as I got back to Salt Lake! Damn! It could take a while to find her another situation, if we even can." The need to rescue Lexi, to get information about her not available by ordinary means, had evidently rammed the "transformation" through; but Lexi was safe now. Pam paced the reception, passing back and forth beneath monumental or attenuated red anthropomorphs sublimely indifferent to her dilemma. "It won't be easy, she needs a lot of sensitive support. I hate to put anything extra on Jaime and Claudia right now. Maybe one of the other Gaians, or like a younger couple — "

"Couldn't I just come with you?"

Humphrey and Pam spun around, and there, of course, was Lexi standing in the doorway, barefoot in underpants and T-shirt and her white sling. "They can kill me off. Or maybe leave me with the Pawnees till my arm gets better. I wouldn't be any trouble, honest," she pleaded, "I could help out!"

Shit! Before Pam could stop herself she had blurted sharply, "How long have you been standing there eavesdropping?"

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"I didn't *mean* to eavesdrop! I just woke up and heard you talking, and my arm was hurting, and then you said," her voice squeaked up, she was trying not to cry, "that it was a picture of the Hefn, so I got up, I was going to come out, but then I wasn't sure if I should, and then you said — "

Two tears spilled down her face. Stricken, Pam rushed to put her arms around Lexi, taking care not to bump the wrist. "Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry. You weren't eavesdropping at all, I shouldn't have used that word, it's our fault for talking where you might wake up and hear us." The girl sagged against her, crying openly now, not trying to hold it in. Inwardly Pam sagged too. Her bubble of excitement had been popped, but that wasn't the worst. Given a good enough reason, she had proved as ready to betray Lexi as any of them.

"Little Lexi, do not cry," Humphrey said, and quietly to Pam, "Shall I take this memory away?"

Pam shook her head; but Lexi, her face muffled in Pam's teal-green uniform shirt, said, "Could I come to Texas if I did?"

"You can come anyway," Pam said. "Or else neither of us will go, but from now on we stick together no matter what. I promise."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

YOU'RE PROBABLY READING this issue during the dog days of summer, but here at the Spilogale factory our workers are busily stocking up on fiction for the fall and winter.

In our December issue, we've got "Finisterra" lined up. Written by newcomer David Moles, this science fiction story is an ambitious and imaginative adventure that calls to mind the early works of Lucius Shepard.

We've also got penciled in for December Frederic S. Durbin's creepy story of a killer encountering small-town life in the Midwest in "The Bone Man." David Marusek and Michaela Roessner are also likely to have stories in the issue.

Among the other stories that the Spilogale factory is producing are new ones by John Kessel, Alex Irvine, and Kate Wilhelm, to name just three. Subscribe now and join us as we try to make the new year our best one yet.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Book Clubbed

"*The Book Club Companion* has a goal: to emulate one of the most successful and evergreen how-to guides around. It would like to tell you what to expect when you're expecting to read a book.

"To that end, the author, Diana Loevy, puts on her party hat and pulls out all the stops. She calls for everything from hole punchers (aren't you keeping a scrapbook?) to dog costumes. And she treats any literary experience as an occasion for merriment. Gauche as it might be to bake Marie Antoinette Cake in honor of the French Revolution, *The Book Club Companion* steers the festive reader in that direction."

— "Which Cheese Goes Best With Faulkner?" by Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, September 4, 2006.

IT ALL started innocently enough, I suppose. No one could have predicted at the beginning that our weekly book club meetings would result in over a dozen ruined marriages, the disbanding of the PTA at Edmund Wilson Middle School, several bank holdups, one full-blown international crisis, three gender-reassignment operations, and at least four separate stints at various drug-rehab clinics, not to mention an additional bushel basket of similarly upsetting incidents, all of which stood out vividly in our small town of Farblondjet, Nebraska.

But despite all the tumult and distress, I still fondly recall the enthusiasm and high hopes we all had for our little literary salon at the start.

We convened that first Wednesday night at Sally Peterson's house. Sally had the nicest rumpus room, with a wet bar and pool table and lots of comfy seating, and had been generous enough to volunteer her place. Originally we were going to rotate our meetings among the houses of the various members. But when Sarah Ozols protested that

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she'd never fit us all into her studio apartment (over in the Latvian-dominated Brindleback district, where no one trusted the street parking anyway), we all voted to make Sally's home our permanent meeting spot.

So there we were, fifteen women who more or less all knew each other pretty well (we had tried unsuccessfully to interest a few of our husbands and boyfriends in the group), holding Bloody Marys and wondering how to begin.

"Has anyone ever been in a book club before?" asked Tina Feldman. "I certainly haven't done anything so creative myself."

A chorus of "no's" greeted her question.

"I didn't think so," continued Tina. "That's why I went looking for a reference work to help us get started. Here's what I found."

She dug a book out of her knitting bag and passed it around.

Diana Loevy's *The Book Club Companion.*

The Bible of our doom.

We all clustered around the book, studying its light-hearted, good-natured, informative pages that taught us such clever tricks as how to entertain (and drink!) thematically. Excitement surged, and pretty soon we had concluded our first meeting by vowing to pattern ourselves completely along the lines of Loevy's guide.

"This will be so much fun!" exclaimed Donna Starzl. "No dry literary discussions! More like a costume party or an amateur theatrical event or a support group every week!"

"But centered around a book," Beth Ostrander politely reminded us.

"Of course," said Tina. "We just have to choose our first title."

Well, none of us wanted to venture right off the bat into the confusing domain of brand-new books, so in the end we opted for a classic: James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice.*

"And we can watch the movie afterwards too!" shouted out Lena Bolland. Lena had had three Bloody Marys to everyone else's two. "That John Garfield was so hot!"

"John Garfield?" I said. "I thought that was Jack Nicholson...."

"You're both right," said Beth. "There were two versions. But no movie-watching till you've read the actual book."

"And don't forget," Tina chirped in, "we're doing the whole discussion Loevy-style!"

The next week we reconvened,

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and everyone had gone enthusiastically full out, totally getting into the spirit of the Loevy-style book club.

All the girls were dressed up in period clothing, Depression-era duds they had dug out of attics. Some came in "drag," as men with false mustaches. A few had borrowed vintage cars like the ones we saw in the annual Elks parade.

Inside, we each got handed a drink of "bathtub gin." Snacks were Ritz crackers and Spam and Velveeta.

Then we started discussing the book.

The conversation quickly grew hot and heavy as we argued about whether Frank and Cora were right to follow their hearts and passion and kill Cora's dreary husband Nick.

"Well, let me tell you something," said Alice Sanders, her face all flushed, "if someone like Frank ever came into my life, I wouldn't think twice about doing the same thing to my Harry!"

The room fell silent. Then Sarah said, "Alice, don't you think that's going a little too far...?"

"No, I don't! This discussion has made me see my whole life differently. It's just — it's just so intense to act books out this way! I never knew fiction could be so powerful and meaningful! God bless that Diana Loevy!"

The conversation quickly shifted to less personal interpretations of the book, and we eventually broke up, although thanks to the bathtub gin I don't really remember too much about the final hours of the meeting. In fact, the next day I had to call up Irma to learn what the next book was. It turned out to be another classic, *Madame Bovary*.

What a turnout everyone made for that book! How the sewing machines hummed! Old mothballed bridesmaid gowns were exhumed and fancied up. Horse-drawn carriages were rented from farmers. Sally laid on Champagne (actually, sparkling California wine), and we made the Frenchiest recipes that Rachael Ray offered.

The one sad thing was that Alice Sanders was nowhere to be seen. We were all abuzz about her absence, but it was not until a few days later that we learned from the local television news about the tragedy at her house and how Alice and some young man named Jimmy Wayne "Knuckles" Burgess were now wanted criminals on the lam, last seen heading for the Mexican border.

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But to get back to Flaubert. So many of us empathized with poor Emma and her affairs and her spendthrift, self-indulgent ways that barely compensated for her boring marriage. I guess it was only natural that a few of us would go on afterwards to a little extramarital hankypanky and some running up of the old credit cards.

You can see where things were heading with our book club. The Diana Loevy method of getting deeply into these novels was just so powerful that the books took hold of our lives.

Perhaps our choices of which titles to read weren't too wise either. If only we had picked something like *Little Women* or *Little House on the Prairie*.

But we didn't. In fact, for next week we decided to do Jackie Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*.

When Sally opened the door to her house for me that Wednesday, she was wearing a fringed leather vest over her bare chest, a headband, and a pair of polka-dotted short shorts.

"Groovy Carnaby Street gear!" she exclaimed, admiring my vinyl miniskirt and go-go boots. "Come right in!"

The refreshments that night were bowls of pills. Sally had gotten her nephew, Harold, who went to college in Omaha, to provide her with something called "ecstasy."

"Are you sure these pills are safe?" I asked.

"Oh, hang loose, babe! Is Loevy your guru or not?"

Embarrassed and not wanting to be a party-pooper, I indulged.

It was right after that night that the PTA had to disband, in light of a highly radioactive public freakout by several strung-out moms. Things were said that just made it impossible ever to work together on bake sales again.

Of course the whole town of Farblondjet was in a dither by now. But no one outside of our book club really knew the cause of all the recent scandals. The men especially were clueless. And we Loevy-ites were in too deep now to stop, recruiting new members to replace the ones we lost to jail and other distractions.

Over the next few weeks, we tackled Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*, Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge*, George Higgins's *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, Nicholson Baker's *Vox*, and William Vollman's *The Royal Family*, among others. That last one was particularly trying. Not only was it a dreadfully long book to read, but I picked up a really

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nasty infection working for a week in a certain exclusive establishment in Nevada....

I suppose we would have gone on in this fashion much longer, if not for our choice to tackle John le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl.* Those Middle-Easterners are so darn touchy! The headlines from the arrests of Sally, Beth, and a half dozen other Farblondjet natives found meddling in the Gaza Strip broke the secrets of our little club, and we were forced to temporarily suspend our literary activities, especially since Sally's home was now the legal property of Hamas.

But the survivors of the local program dedicated to the methods of *The Book Club Companion* are determined to reunite soon.

If anyone shows up next week, we're going to tackle Pauline Réage's *The Story of O.*

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This story marks the fiction-writing debut of M. Ramsey Chapman, who writes from New Mexico.

Two Weeks After

By M. Ramsey Chapman

A DIRT-STREAKED YELLOW taxi drove silently up Alvarado Street in the early dawn. The sun had peeked over the horizon a few minutes ago. In an hour, still-sleepy adults would begin emerging from their homes — some of them clutching bagels or travel mugs of coffee — and start making their way to work or taking their kids to school or daycare. An hour after that the angle of the rising sun would ignite the oven that the neighborhood became each day for six months of the year. But for now the street was quiet and cool.

The brunette in the backseat wasn't very talkative this morning, and Jack wanted to break the silence.

"I'd play the radio," he said. "But it hasn't worked in ages."

There was no response.

After a moment, he said: "I sure am sorry."

"Do you know how many times you've said that in the last two weeks?"

Jack started to speak but caught himself. Apologizing for apologizing would only make things worse.

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"You sure you only want two hours?" he said.

"*I* only want one. *You* wanted longer. We compromised. Remember?"

"I know. It's just that it's the last time either of us will ever see 'em."

"Which is what makes it so painful and why I don't wanna prolong the experience. I can't believe you even talked me into this."

"It's the right thing to do."

"*I* think it'll only make it worse. We should just turn around and never let 'em hear from us again."

Jack spun the wheel to the right and steered the cab onto Old Pierce Road. One block up was an aged blue and white bungalow with a mailbox painted to look like the New Mexico flag. It was where Jack first picked April up two weeks ago, though it seemed now that they had known each other for years.

She had come to the door wearing a tight yellow floral dress that didn't quite reach her knees, and even though his head was pounding fiercely from the previous night's bender, Jack hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her smooth, tanned legs. He had kept his gaze on them as she kissed her hubby good-bye and then turned and walked toward the cab, her hips swiveling deliciously in the tight dress.

As she drew closer, he had slowly raised his eyes, appreciating the curves of her body, until his gaze met the scowl on her face.

Jack had grinned in reply.

Then he added a wink.

He felt ashamed of himself now, knowing what April was going to tell her husband — and what he was going to tell his wife.

"It's gonna be hard on 'em," he said.

"I know."

"I'm gonna try to soften it as much as I can."

"You think I'm not?"

Jack sighed. The closer they got to her address, the more tense and defensive April had become.

He pulled the cab into her driveway and stopped but didn't set the parking brake. He heard the click of a door latch and then the squeak of hinges. The cab gave a bounce and then — *slam!*

Jack rolled down his window and the scent of pine trees and flowers flowed in. As April walked around to his side of the car, he saw that the

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bright blue-and-white morning glories in front of the house were still open.

"Two hours," she said. "Be on time."

"I will."

He rolled up his window and April watched him slowly back the cab out of her driveway and then glide silently up the street.

When the cab turned the corner onto Alvarado, April summoned her courage and faced the house.

She and Kyle had bought it three years ago, just after they were married. It was their first house, and he carried her over the threshold. That memory made her feel good. She shivered, though, when she stepped up onto the porch and stood on the spot where she had kissed him goodbye for what was supposed to be a short visit to her mother's.

Fate had had something else in mind, she thought. Jack changed everything.

April fumbled with the contents of her handbag and finally produced a set of keys. She unlocked the front door and opened it — slowly, so that the noise wouldn't wake Kyle. She stole inside and looked around the living room. It had southern exposure, so it was still dim at this time of morning, but she could see well enough.

April wrinkled her nose. There was an unfamiliar smell — sweet and sour — like trash going bad.

Her gaze slid across the furniture — the old, ratty couch, the coffee table with patchy varnish, the metal folding chairs, and the soft, green recliner that leaned too far back on one side because it had a broken spring or something. There was a pile of raggedy hunting magazines in one corner and an overflowing trash can in another.

It struck her — for the first time, really — just how shabby it all looked.

Of course, Kyle had known it all along. He'd apologized for the fact that they had to make do with used furniture, most of which he had gotten from his parents. She had told him that she didn't care what kind of furniture they had. As long as they were together, that was what mattered. And she'd meant it. Until now her feelings for him had kept her from realizing just how pitiful their home was.

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She turned and walked resolutely toward the bedroom.

Sunlight was streaming through the curtains, but Kyle wasn't yet awake. He lay sprawled on one side of their bed — her side — a yellow pad of paper and a pen next to him.

On the night table stood a large vase of dark green glass with a dozen long-stemmed roses in it. There was also a mostly finished jug of Arbor Mist Strawberry White Zinfandel — her favorite — along with two wine glasses, one of which was still half full.

April picked up the jug and swished around the wine. Looks like only three or four glasses left, she thought. Her wine snob sister had always ribbed her for liking "that horrible stuff," but at least they could afford it, and April enjoyed the strawberry taste and smell.

She unscrewed the cap and poured some in the unused glass from the night table. It was warm and the aroma was strong. It was supposed to be served chilled and the taste would be off, but April took a gulp and reached for the legal pad beside Kyle's sleeping form.

"THINGS I LOVE ABOUT YOU," he had written at the top of it. Below that was a numbered list naming her smile, the way her eyes sparkled, the way her hair smelled, and her long, beautiful legs.

He's a guy, so of course the physical stuff comes first, April thought as she took another gulp of wine.

The list continued by naming the way she sang in the church choir — just like an angel — and the work she did with the youth group. It listed her sympathy, her understanding, how encouraging she was when he was sad, and how she didn't complain when he went hunting or fishing or about their old house and shabby furniture.

April rolled her eyes.

This is why they invented the word *maudlin*, she thought.

There was more, but April didn't read it. She put the pad down and drained the last of her glass. Looking at Kyle, she felt a knotting in her stomach.

He must have cried himself to sleep, she thought.

She bent down and touched the side of his face.

He's dreaming about me.

Jack pulled the taxi into the parking lot of the nearest grocery store.

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It was an Albertson's, and he thought the odds of anyone recognizing him here were pretty small. He was still on the side of town where April lived, so he didn't have any friends here, and he didn't really hang out in supermarkets to begin with. Patty did all the shopping for them. Jack had dropped off customers here over the years, but he doubted any were here at the moment. Many had been little old ladies who didn't drive and probably weren't even alive anymore.

He found a space next to a battered blue Suburban with California plates. After pulling up beside it, he reached into his pocket and drew out a thick wad of bills — mostly twenties that customers had given him, plus the fives and ones he used to make change. The outer bills were wrinkled and grimy. He spent a few moments counting them....$100...$200...$300 ...$400. When he finished counting he found that he had $484, which was good. He'd need to overpay and overpay big — the bigger the better for the result he needed.

He climbed out of the cab and looked around warily. There were a few customers in the parking lot, but none were looking at him. He pulled up the collar of his denim jacket and tugged down his worn John Deere cap.

Entering the store, he spotted the florist's stand and went straight to it. It was too early for the florist to be there, but the refrigerated case still held a few flowers left over from yesterday. There were no roses of any kind, but Jack found something acceptable: a large bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums.

Then he went to find the school supplies section. He kept his face pointed down the aisles, skipping sideways from one aisle to the next, fast enough to look like a man who didn't want to be bothered.

When he found the school supplies, he grabbed two items: a pack of Bic pens and a small spiral notepad with a picture of Dale Earnhardt and a NASCAR logo on it. He opened the cardstock panel on the front of the notepad and carefully tore off the barcode revealing its price. Then he inspected the rest of the panel and the cardboard backing to verify that the price wasn't printed anywhere else.

When he was satisfied, Jack strode to the end of the aisle and looked around. There was no choice now but to expose his face to the whole store as he looked for what he needed next. And there it was: a cardboard display stand of the local newspaper in front of the checkout counters. He would

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have preferred to use the metal vending machines outside — he could have gotten a *Wall Street Journal* from them — but he couldn't overpay in the amount he needed to with a coin slot, so he'd have to make do with a copy of the *Las Cruces Sun-News*.

He grabbed a paper and went to the nearest open checker.

The young Latina looked as if she were about to fall asleep. Jack didn't know if she was just finishing or beginning a long shift. She was far too young to be anyone he knew, but he kept his gaze down as he plunked the newspaper, flowers, pens, and notepad onto the conveyer belt — making sure that the notepad was the farthest from her reach.

She sleepily punched in the code for the newspaper and the flowers and scanned the barcode on the pens. When she came to the notepad, she picked it up and turned it around a couple of times.

"Sorry, sir," she said with an accent. "I ask for a price check on these."

She picked up a telephone handset and started to speak, but Jack said: "Sorry, darlin'! 'Fraid I can't wait!"

He snatched the notepad, grabbed his other items, and slammed $484 down on the conveyer belt. Instantly, his hands began tingling, and he quick-walked out of the store.

Outside, he broke into a sprint and made it to the taxi. He hopped in, fired up the engine, and sped off as quickly as he could, not looking back to see if the clerk had followed him out the door. Several blocks later, he slowed and found a place to park. Sinking back against the torn vinyl seat, he felt his heart racing.

He'd gotten away with it!

Jack ripped open the pack of Bic pens and ruffled through the newspaper until he found the stock market listings.

He closed his eyes, his hands still tingling from the overpayment, and struck blindly with a pen, circling a name at random. When he opened his eyes, he discovered he had circled a company called Barton Pharmaceuticals.

Placing the newspaper with the stock page face up on the passenger's seat, Jack reached into the change cup that he kept in one of the cab's beverage holders. As he grabbed at its contents, he felt a charge like static electricity jump from his hand to the coins, which now felt tingly.

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Quickly placing his fist over the open stock page, he tossed a handful of coins into the air. At the height of their ascent they froze in place and hung, suspended for a full two seconds before plunking down on the paper. Five were heads up and twelve were heads down.

He opened the Dale Earnhardt notepad and wrote "BARTON PHARMACEUTICALS. FIVE YEARS. NO MORE, *NO LESS!!*"

APRIL HAD BROUGHT a folding chair into the bedroom and put it down with the back toward Kyle. She sat in it backward with her arms folded on the top of the metal chair-back and studied his sleeping form. She sat like this for a long time — killing time, frankly. After polishing off the rest of the jug of strawberry Zinfandel, she played with a rose from the vase until she pricked her finger on one of the thorns, causing a bright red drop to well out. She sucked it off and then began popping the thorns off the stem, using her long, polished fingernails to keep from getting pricked again.

When the stem was bare, April gave an impatient sigh and stood up. She shimmied out of her yellow floral dress and her underpants, dropping them on the floor. After unhooking her brassiere and hanging it on the chair, she sat carefully on the bed and slowly lay down next to Kyle.

She ran her fingers through his sandy hair and could tell he was having one of those wish-fulfillment dreams about being reunited with her after a long separation. When he saw her, he rushed up and flung his arms around her. Lifting her off her feet, he began peppering her face with kisses.

Then he sensed that something was wrong and his eyes widened.

He was about to speak when April interrupted.

"Don't say anything, honey. I'm here with you now."

April slid under the covers and snuggled up to him.

She lightly danced her fingernails across the back of his neck in the way that always drove him wild, and his dream face relaxed and moved closer to kiss hers.

Lips glided against lips. Hands glided against hips. Their bodies pressed together, and then...

Kyle opened his eyes and gasped. He scrambled away from her,

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crossing his side of the bed and plopping onto the floor. He clambered a few feet backward until he was up against the door of the clothes closet and could go no farther.

Jack pulled into his own driveway and sat for a moment, smoking a Camel cigarette. He ran his fingers across the two weeks' worth of salt-and-pepper whiskers on his chin.

It would be a terrible shock for Patty, and he didn't know what he could do to cushion it. Given how early she rose, she was almost certainly up. Heck, she'll have eaten breakfast and done the dishes by now, he thought.

He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray and got out of the cab.

Marching dutifully up the front walk, the chrysanthemums in hand, he made his way to the doorstep and rang the bell.

A few moments later, Patty opened the door.

Her face blanched. She staggered backward, heaving in air in horrible, sharp, sickly gasps that made it sound as if her lungs were about to rip. For a moment her eyes were starting out of her head, then her eyelids sank and she tumbled backward onto the green shag carpet.

Jack pulled open the screen door and rushed to her side, kneeling beside her on the rug. He reached into his jacket pocket and yanked out a phone. He flipped it open and pressed the hot key for 9-1-1.

Nothing happened.

Damn! he thought. The battery hasn't been charged in two weeks.

He was about to run for the landline when it struck him that he should check Patty's pulse in case she needed CPR. He seized her wrist and felt for the beating of her heart. It was fast, but strong and regular.

Okay, he thought. She's not in danger at the moment. What can I do to help her?

He grabbed the sides of her head and concentrated: She was in the darkness of the void — no consciousness, no thought, just the neutral nothingness that exists between dreams.

Jack closed his eyes and thought about the night the two of them met. It was a good memory. He had been on his best behavior, and she had seen nothing but his good points back then. He pushed the memory down toward Patty and she stirred slightly.

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In a minute, Jack checked her pulse again and found it had dropped to near normal speed.

Whew! he thought.

Kyle sat against the door of the closet, trembling.

"It's okay!" April said. "Don't worry. Everything's okay."

"H-How can you be here?"

April looked at him steadily and let a long moment go by, hoping that the extra time would let him regain some of his composure. It didn't seem to work, though. Kyle continued to quiver, his breathing fast and shallow.

Finally she decided that there was nothing to do but say it flat out.

"I'm a ghost," she said. "I'm April's ghost. And I've come to say goodbye."

Patty was reliving the night of the dance, the night she first saw Jack and got her friend Wanda to introduce them. Jack was thin and handsome and considerate. He was wearing dark blue jeans and a freshly pressed white shirt and a new straw cowboy hat. He asked her to dance, and they two-stepped across the floor through song after song. In the kaleidoscope of memory fragments, he looked like some kind of Greek god in a tile mosaic. After the dance he offered her a cigarette and her first beer and then the two of them went parking in his pickup truck.

Patty opened her eyes and looked up at Jack. He was kneeling beside her, cupping her head gently in his hands, and he looked like the seventeen-year-old Adonis she had met at the Future Farmers of America dance.

"Am I dreaming?" she said faintly.

"We both are. But it's time to wake up, darlin'."

Jack's features came into focus and his clothes changed. Now he was forty and bulky and unshaven and wearing a denim jacket and a grimy John Deere cap.

"I love you, honey," he whispered.

"I know," she said softly.

Then she added: "I'm so glad you're here."

This is all wrong, April thought as her stomach continued to knot. She

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had wanted to avoid the shock, to blend Kyle's dream with reality so that when he finally realized that she was here — really here and in his arms — it would be a glorious, romantic experience.

Now he was cringing on the floor, his face sweaty and white.

"Don't make me say it," she said.

Kyle looked confused.

"...that you look like you've seen a ghost."

Kyle didn't laugh. He didn't do anything but sit there, trembling like a cornered mouse afraid that she would step on him.

It's not fair, she thought. I *tried* to cushion the blow. Why can't he just accept what I did for him? She frowned and thought: He's always been like that. He never fully appreciated me. I'm here to give him a gift few ever get, and he can't even meet me halfway.

"Don't you have anything to say? 'Hi, honey! I sure did miss you' would be a good start."

Kyle looked hurt.

"Of course!" he said, and a tear started to roll down one of his cheeks. "I've missed you more than I can say! I...I just...I just don't know what *to do!*"

Kyle let his head sag down for a moment. Then he pulled it back up and looked at her, his eyes bloodshot, tears streaming down both cheeks now.

"Is it really you?" he said. "How can you be here?"

We're covering old ground, April thought.

"Yes, it's really me," she said tersely. "And I don't know how I can be here. It just happens this way sometimes. I think it's some kinda quantum thing. Temporary particles split off at the crucial moment or something."

Kyle's eyes darted to the foot of the bed and then slid up it, observing the way the sheet was draped across her naked body.

"You're...solid?"

"Yeah. Don't ask me about that either. I know my real body was such a mess after the crash that you had to have a closed casket funeral. I know it's buried six miles from here. But I'm solid. And I'm whole. The cab driver's the same way. And his cab looks like it did before the crash. It just doesn't make any noise now and you won't smell any exhaust as it drives by."

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Kyle hung his head again and sobbed.

"I thought I'd never see you again," he said hoarsely.

Now we're getting somewhere.

"So that's why I came back," Jack said.

The two of them were sitting on the couch, and Patty had lit a cigarette. His arm was around her, and he gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

"I know I wasn't a good husband to you — "

"You were a wonderful husband!"

"You say that now. You're still in mourning, and I just put a pretty dream in your head, but you know it ain't true. I ran around on you...some. And I drank too much. I was hung over the morning I died. That's why I ran the red light."

Jack lowered his head and said, "And there was that one night."

Patty looked somber.

That one night Jack had come home after getting his ass kicked in a bar fight but it was Patty who ended up in the county trauma center.

"That was fifteen years ago," she said. "I forgave you, and it never happened again."

"I know, but I wasn't the kind of husband that I should have been, and I want to make it up as best I can."

Jack looked down at the bouquet of chrysanthemums in his lap. Feeling stupid, he handed them to Patty and said, "These are for you. I know you like roses or orchids, but there weren't any at Albertson's, and I couldn't go around town shopping because someone who knew me — who knew that I'm dead — might see me."

She lifted the flowers and smelled them. Then she looked at Jack and smiled.

"Yellow mums are my new favorite flower. They always will be. I'm going to hang these upside down and dry them out so I can keep them."

Kyle had regained enough composure that he could sustain a conversation. He was still pale and shaky, but he could talk.

"Your mom told me that she thought you said something to her, but when she turned around, you weren't there."

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"That was me," April replied. "I said I loved her, but she couldn't hear it clearly."

"Your friends said stuff like that, too. Barbara told me that she was doing the dishes and felt your presence in the room with her."

"Me again."

"She said she thought God was making some kinda exception — so you could say good-bye and let us know you're okay."

"It's not as much a exception as you might think. This kinda thing happens all the time when people die."

Kyle looked surprised. "I've never heard of anyone having a solid ghost visit them," he said.

"Well, that's not so common. I fade in and out. The conditions have to be right. I couldn't make it all the way through to Momma and Barbara, but somehow I knew I'd be able to stay solid for you. Unfinished business."

April flung the bed sheet off and got up to begin dressing.

"You know what I found out during my little post-mortem cab ride around our friends and family? I found out Barbara ain't the friend I thought she was. She's had the hots for you for years. I imagine she'll be making a play for you soon — wanting to 'comfort' you in your grief."

Kyle looked at her, dumbfounded.

"Don't you tell me you've never noticed," April said as she finished putting on her dress. "I've seen you looking at her, too."

Now Kyle looked guilty. Good, April thought. Someone needs to hold him accountable for his sins.

She sighed.

"I don't guess I can expect you to stay faithful to me forever. You're a man, and you won't be able to keep your pants zipped. Sooner or later you'll want to remarry...but not *her*. Understand? I don't want you taking that *bitch* into my bed."

Kyle's expression changed. April couldn't decide if it was surprise or anger. Maybe it was both.

Then it struck her that she'd never used the word *bitch* in front of him before.

"I'm just being honest," she said. "I can't be a Sunday school teacher twenty-four/seven. If I can't let my hair down around you, where can I?"

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* * *

Jack was seated on the fraying red chair that had always been his. The fabric was so thin in places that it had come apart, and Jack enjoyed absentmindedly pulling out the stuffing from the arms. Now the curved wooden frames inside them were exposed.

"Can I getcha some breakfast, honey?" Patty asked from the kitchen doorway. "How 'bout a Coors? I've still got a couple of twelve-packs in the 'fridge.... I couldn't bear to move 'em, so I kep' 'em cold for you."

Jack stood up and strode toward her. "I don't want any beer," he said.

"The dead don't drink?"

"No. I mean...that's not what I'm here for. I can't stay long, and I want to do what I can. It's going to be hard now that I'm gone, and I — "

Patty put a finger to his lips.

"Don't worry so much about the future, honey. Just let me enjoy the moment.... Just let me have *this*," she said, taking his hand in hers and holding it up between them. "Since we've got the chance to say good-bye, I want us to do it right."

Patty looked at him for a long moment. Then she dropped her gaze.

"There is one thing you could do for me."

"What's that, darlin'?" he said quietly.

"Well...I'll never get to see you again, and..."

She looked up at him and smiled warmly. "Do the dead make love?"

Kyle looked at April but said nothing. He had been silent for some time and wheels were clearly turning in his mind, but she couldn't tell what he was thinking. There was something cold growing in his gaze — something like what she thought must be there when he was out hunting mule deer.

"What is it?" she asked.

Kyle continued staring silently at her.

"No, seriously. What is it?"

"Just...who are you...exactly?"

"We covered that. I'm April's ghost."

"No," he said. "No, you're not. You're somebody else. I don't think there is such a thing as a 'solid' ghost, and April would never say the things to me that you just did."

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"What? You mean 'cause I used the word *bitch*? Believe me, I'm no stranger to that word. I thought it a lot. I just never said it in front of you."

"I don't mean that," Kyle said. "Everyone cusses in their heads, and if April thought Barbara was trying to get me in bed, she might do it out loud — "

"You're damn right! I don't want you fuckin' that bitch who pretended to be my friend for years while she was secretly fawning over you!"

"I *said* I wasn't talking about that," Kyle replied with ice in his voice. "You didn't just attack her. You attacked *me*. You said I couldn't be faithful to you, that I couldn't keep my pants zipped. That ain't the way April thought — that a man's so sex-obsessed he can't help himself. *And* she knew from the Bible that marriage is only until death, so it's no sin to remarry, as *far* as that thought is from my mind right now. April would never say those things to me, so you've gotta be a impostor."

Kyle looked down at his naked form and then back up at the fully-dressed woman standing on the opposite side of the bed.

"'Scuse me while I get on a robe."

He stood up and opened the door to the closet and produced a yellow terrycloth bathrobe, which he huffily shrugged on and tied at the waist, keeping his eyes on her the whole time.

Then he reached back into the closet and quickly pulled out a battered Winchester M70 rifle. He slammed the bolt forward and pointed the weapon at her.

"Stay right where you are," he said.

JACK LAY with his arm around Patty and enjoyed the feeling of relaxed pleasure in his limbs.

She had her head tucked up under his chin — something that made him feel good — and she had the fingers of one hand crimped on his chest the way she always did after lovemaking, as if she were clutching his chest hairs. Jack was pleased. He had been the kind of lover he always should have been — gentle, tender, making sure that Patty was satisfied.

Now he was slowly brushing her arm with the palm of his hand and occasionally catching a glimpse of his watch to make sure he wouldn't be late picking up April.

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Maybe Patty would get pregnant. Jack liked that idea — of finally giving her the child she wanted. He'd only been gone two weeks. Anybody can miscalculate a pregnancy by two weeks, and the child would look like him. She'd tell her friends that the baby was a going-away present from Jack, that she'd been given a new life to replace what she lost. If it was a boy, maybe she'd name it after him.

His watch began to beep and Jack shut off the noise.

"I'm sorry, darlin', I gotta go now."

Patty raised her head and gave him a hurt look.

"You can't stay any longer?"

"'Fraid not. I tried to arrange more time but couldn't."

She studied him and saw he was serious.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Who am I to question the time that heaven gives you." Then she smiled and whispered, "I'm just glad we had this much."

Kyle kept the rifle trained on April, and she stared at him angrily.

"Pick up that cell phone and slide it to me across the bed," he said, nodding toward a small silver Nokia that lay on the night table.

"What do you think you're gonna do?" she asked.

"I'm gonna call the police and let them figure out who you are."

"I told you — "

"*I know!*" Kyle shouted. "But you're *not* April. I can think of crazy possibilities about what you are. *Maybe* you're a demon. Or *maybe* you're some damned soul that escaped from hell. Or maybe you're just the evil twin I never knew April had and you're trying to play some kind of mind game on me. You sure as hell ain't April, and given how solid you felt in bed, *my* money's on evil twin, so hand me the phone."

She made no move to comply.

"Pull the trigger," she said.

Kyle blinked.

"I'm serious. Pull the trigger. You need proof I'm a ghost, that this isn't a ordinary physical body, you'll get it."

He didn't move.

"I don't think so," he said. "I think we'll just call nine-one-one and let the police sort this out."

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"We're not bringing the cops into this. You want proof I'm a ghost, pull the damn trigger."

Kyle shook his head.

She looked at him fiercely. Then she took a step toward the bed and four quick steps *through* it, wading through the covers and mattress and box springs like they weren't there.

Kyle gaped in astonishment. He let his grip on the gun go slack as she stepped directly in front of him, the barrel pointed at her chest.

"Then lemme help you," she said, grabbing the barrel and giving it a sharp jerk directly toward her heart. As she did so, Kyle stepped back and tried to jerk the gun away.

Click!

The two of them stood frozen for a moment.

"You know I never let you keep that gun loaded in the house, honey."

Jack hugged Patty by the front door and kissed her.

"I'll miss you," she said. "I'll pray for you every day."

"Darlin', I need you to do something," he said, releasing his embrace.

"Anything. Anything at all."

Jack began fishing in his jacket pocket.

"There's this company called Barton Pharmaceuticals. I want you to take every bit of money you can raise, beg, or borrow and put it into that company's stock. Stay invested in it for five years. Don't sell, no matter how much you need the money. Then in five years, sell it all and take the cash. 'Kay?"

"I don't understand. I don't know how to buy stock."

"It's okay. Just find a broker in the phone book and call him. He'll help you do it. That's what stock brokers are for...I think."

Jack drew the Dale Earnhardt notepad out of his jacket pocket.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "I wrote it all down. This is my way of taking care of you. I paid a lot for this tip, so Barton should make a killing in the next five years. If you put all the money you can get into it, you'll make enough to...well, at least be comfortable, I hope. Maybe better'n comfortable. If you can raise more money later, put that in, too. Anything you can spare, put it into Barton and then pull it all out five years from today."

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"How do you know all this?"

He grinned and winked.

"Some things ain't for mortals t'know."

After April called his bluff, Kyle had lapsed back into silence. He was almost catatonic now. She'd tried to start a conversation, but he just sputtered and shook his head and clamped his hands over his ears.

He always did have a way of avoiding things he didn't want to hear, she thought. Just not this physically.

April felt a wave of relief when she finally heard Jack blow the taxi's horn out in the driveway.

She stepped toward Kyle, his eyes wide with alarm, and gently took his hands away from his ears.

"Honey, I gotta go now, but there's something you need to know. If you don't believe anything else I've said, believe this: Your wife made it to heaven."

Kyle blinked.

"I...don't understand."

"It's true. *That's* what I came here to tell you. The rest has just been me getting in the way. I'm sorry I couldn't put it to you the way April would, but I'm not her."

"You said — "

"No, I'm not April. I'm April's *ghost*. That's not the same thing. April's soul went off to heaven to be with God, and I'm — I'm what's left behind. April was a good woman, but she had flaws like everybody else. She couldn't be flawed in God's presence, so when her soul went to be with Him she had to leave her selfishness and impatience and jealousy — anything bad or even mediocre. She crawled out of them like a butterfly crawls out of its chrysalis. That's what I am: her chrysalis."

Her face brightened, and a new light came into her eyes.

"You should see April now! I got a glimpse of her just as she was leaving, and she was the most beautiful thing you can imagine. She flapped her wings, and it was like seeing every butterfly, everywhere under the sun. It was like they all flapped their wings — all that color and grace and beauty — all at the same time.

"She asked me to tell you she made it, that she's okay. I almost didn't,

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'cause I knew I'd just mess it up...which is why I have to leave, too." She lowered her gaze and looked ashamed. "I'd only spoil your memory of her."

The taxi's horn blew again.

Jack was about to sound the horn a third time when the door of the blue and white bungalow opened and April stepped out onto the porch.

She closed the door and walked down the steps and straight away from the house, not looking back.

Jack could see her bathrobed hubby watching from the window, looking like his world had just been turned inside out.

I can't blame him, Jack thought. I hope Patty's doing as well.

Behind him there was a *klatch* and a squeak and a bounce and a slam.

He backed out of the driveway and drove noiselessly up the street. When he turned onto Alvarado, he said, "So how did it go?"

"Not as good as it could have."

"Well, you expected that. Did you tell him that he doesn't have to worry — that your soul made it to God and you're just what's left behind?"

"Yeah."

"Did he believe you?"

"I hope so."

After a few moments of silence April squirmed forward and folded her arms on the back of the front seat. "How 'bout you? I assume you didn't tell your wife why you're Mr. Wonderful all of a sudden — why you're all her husband's good points with none of the bad."

Jack kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "Not on your life."

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Paul Park lives in Massachussetts with his family. His recent work has been focused on a quartet of fantasy novels: A Princess of Roumania, The Tourmaline, The White Tyger, *and* The Hidden World. *His new story for us makes an interesting counterpoint to Albert Cowdrey's tale in this same issue.*

Fragrant Goddess

By Paul Park

HE WAS FAMILIAR WITH THE house, of course, having seen it in photographs and once in person a dozen years before. He didn't remember it being so huge. He and Sabine had come up the walkway between these same bronze foo dogs, the male with its paw on a bronze ball. Then — still — the windows had been brown with sticky paper, opaque, as Jeremy had pointed out. No one had lived there for many years. The house had been abandoned after Arkady Ferson's death in the early 1970s. There was a suggestion he'd been murdered, a possibility that intrigued Sabine far more than Ferson's small connection with the subject of Jeremy's dissertation. Now the front door stood open and Sabine, he imagined, waited for him inside.

Or else she was watching him from the front windows or the shelter of the porch — he didn't like that idea. The stone walk was a long one. His leg hurt. As he approached, he thought she might be calculating all the ways he'd changed. He saw himself diminishing as he got bigger. He was kind of bald. He wasn't in great shape. And of course he limped. Which would she notice first?

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"Boo!"

She was perched along the back of the female dog, motionless, invisible, in clear sight. Now she scrambled down, and any consolation that the years might also have treated her unkindly was already gone. In the bright sunlight she seemed radiant to him, dressed in an Indian printed smock above her knees. It fastened with a string around her neck. She hugged him, and he was aware of her smell, which came back suddenly — the same lavender perfume mixed with the same sweat. He felt her naked arms around his neck, aware also of his damp, uncomfortable suit. This was the third time he was in Seattle and he'd never seen a drop of rain — how small she was! He had forgotten.

Her face was close by his. She'd never been a beautiful woman, he remembered with surprise. Her features had always been too big for her small face. But she had always seemed beautiful — a European trick perhaps — and younger than she was. At twenty-six she'd looked like a teenager, especially at a distance. It was the language of her body — "gamine," he supposed. Now, as she separated from him and scampered barefoot up the stairs, she looked twenty-six or so.

He followed her through the line of fat white Ionic columns to the front door. He'd read a little bit about the house, knew, for example, there was a fine Tiffany window over the staircase, and the walls had been hand-painted by...someone, some marginally famous turn-of-the-century decorative artist — he'd not been interested in any of those things until he'd had to imagine Sabine living here.

She made a little pirouette in the cavernous, dark entranceway. "I'm so excited to see you," she said, her accent still thick. When he'd first met her, she'd scarcely spoken any English. Now she was fluent, obviously, and his French was rusty. So they turned naturally to a language they'd never spoken with each other. "I can't wait to show you," she said. She ran up the double stairway to the landing and stood below the window, a floral pattern of green and crimson glass. She wore an ankle bracelet, he noticed, and the bottoms of her feet were dark.

"Tell me again how this happened," he said.

"I told you on the phone! When Scott and I first moved out here, we bought a house in Fremont — you know? But his parents were living too close by. Once we came by here and there was a real estate sign — I'd told

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him how I'd knocked on the door with you — do you remember? I had always remembered this place. Always I used to drive past when I had the chance, and when the sign came, Scott said it was an opportunity. But I suppose it was a gift for me — do you know Arkady Ferson also lived in Belgium? We bought it from the Lightbearers Foundation — do you like it?" she asked, as if she were talking about the dress she wore, and which she was modeling for him under the dappled light, and which he did like very much. It was blue and red and left her arms exposed. He could see the soft hair in her armpits. And she didn't have to bother with a bra or anything like that.

Once he had shared a cab with her down Fifth Avenue, thirty blocks in rush hour from the University Club to her apartment — a cold, rainy night, and they had kissed and groped each other the entire way. Her wet shirt had been unbuttoned to her waist. Why hadn't she asked him to come up? No, it was because he had to continue on cross-town. He was meeting Joanna and her parents at some Chinese restaurant on Ninth. All the way there he'd been sniffing himself guiltily, and he was already late, and Joanna was already pissed off. "She has no idea how virtuous I am," he'd thought as he'd washed his face and hands in the cramped restaurant bathroom. The lavender smell had already dissipated, to be replaced, with any luck, by the scent of Joanna's perfume, the musk oil she used to wear in those days. Sabine had met Scott right after that.

He stood below her on the stair. She was smiling, and she raised her left hand to her mouth to hide her big teeth — an endearing gesture that he remembered now. Did she ever think about that taxi ride? Was she thinking about it now? He couldn't help himself: "You must be awfully rich!"

"Well, no — I don't think so. I mean yes and no — I suppose we are. We have to work, of course."

Just out of law school when she'd married him, Scott was now the head litigator for a timber company. A novice when Jeremy had known him, now he was some kind of A player, which even on the West Coast stood for something. Since the accident, of course, Jeremy no longer played.

Had he told her about the accident? He'd mentioned the divorce, he knew. And the tenure decision. When she'd met him he had already been

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working on his dissertation, his book on Leonardo Fioravanti. Some things hadn't changed, at least.

But it was squash that had brought them together, at the club where he'd given lessons all through graduate school. The North American Open had been in Seattle that year. During the break after the Women's C quarter-final, he and Sabine had climbed the hill to Arkady Ferson's old house. Jeremy had wondered if any of the Lightbearers still lived there. He was already out of the A draw.

Now Sabine was talking to him and he realized he wasn't listening. But he followed her from room to room. "...I leave the door unlocked and it is best I do. You know it is the Asian art museum inside the park, and many times people think this house is part of the museum. So they come right into the front hall. I don't like them to call me or ring the bell. But I keep a feather duster beside the door, and if I am downstairs I pick it up. That way they can think I am the maid, something like that. *S'il vous plaît,*" she said, turning, hands on hips, knees together. "*La patronne n'est pas à la maison.* It is mostly Chinese people who come in."

He laughed and she laughed too, hiding her teeth. There was a skylight above the staircase. It filled the upper floor with brightness and shining dust motes. Jeremy wondered if the Lightbearers had ever sealed it up. Or was it only sections of the house that they'd kept dark?

"You said you had something for me."

"La, la, la. It is a surprise."

She showed him her office and her exercise room. It was lined with mirrors and filled with low-tech wooden equipment. Nothing like the machines at the racquet club, they looked like Scandinavian toys for gifted children. When he asked about them, she lay down on one to demonstrate. But then she sat up suddenly, blushing, radiant. "I should wear a different dress," she said.

Because of the mirrors. "It's beautiful," he said.

Embarrassed, she pointed toward the open window. "I like the roofs best of all. Come with me. Can you, with your leg?"

"It doesn't hurt."

"You will have to take your shoes off."

And so they climbed onto the asphalt and tar. It was like an entire country up there, with mountains and flat places, and the skylight a

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reflecting pool. "I spend more time here than in the house," she said — hard to believe. But on the steepest shingles there were marks of little trails, like goat paths in the Alps.

Following her, he passed a cereal bowl and an empty juice glass balanced on a ledge. He found her squatting on the ridgepole, three stories above the street. He climbed atop a dormer and stood up. He could see the whole neighborhood of mansions, gardens, and big trees. There was a tower in the park across the street. "People come here to make love," she said. "No, in the cars in that parking lot or by the curb. I don't know why. Look, you can see them — "

He saw nothing. He was watching her. "Sometimes I like to think about them, shut up in their little cars," she said.

And the taxi ride? "What about Scott?" he asked.

She laughed, hid her mouth. "I hope he has a mistress. Poor man! But you will see — tonight he is going to St. Louis for his business."

Before Scott she had married an American in Brussels where she was from, a Wall Street type. Once in the United States, he had treated her badly. That was the time Jeremy had known her best, when he was already living with Joanna. She had used to come to lessons close to tears. Squash had started as a way of keeping hold of her first husband, who had not deserved her.

Now she squatted above Jeremy, knees apart. "What about Joanna?" she asked.

He shrugged. The subject was unavoidable. And then suddenly Joanna came back to him, an image of her face, her coarse hair and freckled skin. Her beautiful thick eyebrows, the hair on her arms and upper lip. The surprised expression on her face, when he'd seen her the last time. He looked out toward the tower in the park.

Sabine said, "Once I was up here and it started to rain. But the window slided down and I was trapped outside. So I saw a little man walking there along that street and I had to call out. I told him to go into the house and I led him upstairs with the sound of my voice — la, la, la! Isn't that ridiculous? He was just anyone!"

What did she mean by this little story, told in this bright tone? He made a calculation: She must not have heard about Joanna's death. No reason she should have. They'd never met, after all.

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He turned back to look at her — smiling, squatting above him on the roof. No reason to bring up something that might cast a pall — literally, he supposed. No — figuratively. No — literally. It was not something he wanted to discuss.

He said, "After the accident I couldn't forgive her. I thought I could, but I couldn't. I broke my pelvis. I guess I told you."

"She was driving?"

"Yes, but it wasn't her fault. It was on the Merritt Parkway. There was a big rainstorm. I looked up at her from the stretcher — she was soaking wet. We'd put off having children until my job was permanent — just as well. She was always careful that way."

"I did not wish to make you sad. So, and Fioravanti?"

Jeremy smiled. "I'm surprised you remember. That was the problem, wasn't it? No publications. Or else not enough — no book, at least."

Once more Sabine tried to change the subject. "I used to love to watch you play."

And in a little bit, "It's not so wonderful sometimes, having children. Sometimes you feel like an imposter, I suppose. I look at Sophie and think I'm not her mother."

"I wasn't even competing anymore," Jeremy said. Embarrassed, he put his hand over his bald spot. "We've all lost something," he said — a fatuous remark. But she smiled, wrinkled up her nose.

"*Très distingué*. But we must not let you get a sunburn for your interview! And besides, I have not shown you what I found!"

"What did you find?" In fact he was eager to know. That was why he was here, after all, not to reminisce about old happy times.

"I found it downstairs. You will see!"

She'd mentioned it on the phone when he had called. Something about Ferson and Fioravanti — his obsession. Now she hid her mouth again; her hand was dark with asphalt. She was laughing at him, he thought. Stringing him along. She didn't move to go until a couple of minutes later — "Oh, damn! There is Sophie, home from school. She won't like her crazy mother up here. Quick, we must get down."

Carrying a book bag, a girl was walking down the street under the big trees. Sabine crouched out of sight, and then she slid down the shingles toward the back of the house. There she ran along the narrow lip of the

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roof, thirty feet above the garden, until she came to a small dormer — not the window they had climbed up through. Jeremy followed her more carefully, and by the time he dropped down into her bathroom, Sabine was already filling up a small brass tub, dipping her feet in. "Please, sit here and wash your feet. I had this made expressly. Scott thinks it is some kind of bidet. You must use a loofah and some almond soap."

He sat beside her on the tub's wooden rail, scrubbing first one foot, then the other. Their thighs touched. Then she slipped away, scuffing her feet along a towel on the floor, leaving dark streaks. "Sophie! Sophie!" she called. "*Il y a quelqu'un.*... There is someone you must meet."

LATER, AT the conference hotel, lying awake past midnight, Jeremy tried to recompose the afternoon into an erotic history. He needed to calm down and get some rest. His interview was early and he needed this job — a tenure-track position at Butler College. And so he tried to imagine sexual intercourse on the burning rooftop or in the bathroom. That would have been more comfortable, spread out on those fluffy towels.

But even in his own fantasy he was disturbed by small, fleeting memories of Joanna, her hair coarse and wild as she turned, her expression of surprise as he attempted to embrace her. No, he didn't want to think about that: Back to business. He spat on his palms, got to work. Nose to the grindstone. Hand to the plow. So — the bathroom, then. But there was Sophie outside the door. When he and Sabine had gone downstairs she'd looked at him without a hint of suspicion. And then Scott had shown up, glad to see him, full of old times. Sabine had prepared a meal earlier that day, and now she just had to heat it up in the enormous kitchen. Already she seemed distracted. And she resisted when he asked her to show him the basement — that was the reason he had come, of course. Not to see how rich she was. He persisted. She refused. What was there to see? A bunch of carpeted rooms without any light fixtures. Locks on all the doors.

Scott laughed. "She's got her little temple down there. No men allowed."

Sabine dried her hands on a towel. "There is not so much from the Lightbearers' time. Some books and so."

"But you mentioned something."

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"Yes, of course. Just one thing. What do you think? Here—I will walk you out."

He had to get back for the Renaissance Studies dinner. She led him out into the entranceway again. Then she picked up from the mantelpiece what looked like a spice bottle with a screw-on cap. "You see I remember what you told me all those years ago."

He took the bottle. There was some black liquid at the bottom of it, a thick black sludge. Confused, he held it up. She seemed proud of herself. But he felt stupid. "I'd like to see the books," he said, finally. "Anything. You're sure you couldn't show me the downstairs?"

That, suddenly, was the wrong thing to say. "You're not even paying attention! 'Fragrant Goddess' — you see I remember. I kept it for you. I knew you would call one day. But you are never satisfied. Always you want more."

Now, in his hotel bed, Jeremy saw what she meant. He was unsatisfied. He wanted more.

He wanted to walk down the dark stairs into her temple, her inner sanctum, as Scott had described it. Fragrant Goddess — was she kidding him? But there was some crude Cyrillic script on the label. Something scrawled in pencil. Was this a joke she had whipped up in her kitchen, with its copper pots and pans?

If so, where had she found the recipe? What was she hiding? Some books and so — what books?

Down in the Lightbearers' labyrinth, Sabine was waiting for him in the dark. She was lying on her back before the private altar in her temple. But as Jeremy fumbled through the little rooms of his small fantasy, inevitably he found himself grabbing hold of other ghosts, old men long dead. And this was another kind of delusion: Perhaps in Ferson's library there were some undiscovered papers, some new information about Leonardo Fioravanti, the Bolognese alchemist and surgeon who had tormented Jeremy all these years.

In Naples he had discovered the cause of syphilis, the French Pox. Though spread through lechery, the root of it was cannibalism, as he determined by feeding pig meat to a pig, dog meat to a dog, hawk meat to a hawk, and watching them die of the disease. Fioravanti had the cure, though, for it and many other illnesses. Taken both internally and as a

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salve, his nostrums reduced fevers, knitted broken bones, cured heartsickness, took away all pain, even in hopeless cases, Jeremy thought. "Theriac" was one, made from snake's blood. "Scorpion's Oil" was another. "Fragrant Goddess" was a third, the strongest of all. It was a remedy Fioravanti had learned from a slave, a woman from the Spanish Netherlands whom he had liberated after the siege of "Africa," a town on the Tunisian coast.

To Jeremy he was a Protean, elusive figure. Because of the lies he told in print and even in his private correspondence, he seemed to represent a new phase in the history of masculine self-invention. This was what Jeremy's book was about. And because he wanted to dramatize the social difference between doctors and empirics in the late Renaissance, Jeremy had tried (or at least lately he was trying) to alternate chapters of conventional historiography with passages of historical fiction. Theory and argument gave way to invented narrative in different sections of the book — an invented secret history of Fioravanti's life, a substitute for the actual *Secret History* the alchemist had claimed to write, which was of course lost. In these fictional passages, however, Jeremy was beginning to see caricatures of his old professors and other long-standing experts in his field. And in the main figure of the drama, a caricature of himself.

Men staggered into middle age so damaged and so hurt, so guilty, Jeremy thought, every one of them was looking for a magic balm to heal them without any need for introspection or forgiveness. In its multiple drafts, his manuscript now told the story of Jeremy's disaffection, his distrust of academic knowledge, and his embrace, Fioravanti-style, of experience, lies, and sensory information. Now the book was seven hundred pages, and even in his overheated dreams, it was impossible for Jeremy to imagine an academic press would ever touch it.

Impossible, also, to concentrate on the task at hand. Instead of Sabine in her temple, which just a few minutes before he had been decorating with embroidered pillows and silk brocades, bronze statuettes of Hindu deities and clouds of incense smoke, as well as (God help him!) mirrors and exercise equipment while she lay flat on her back on the narrow bench, skirt rucked up, knees out to the side — now it was Arkady Ferson he imagined, an old man sitting stiffly on his stool in the same room.

Arkady Ferson had lived in that house. He had haunted that basement.

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That had been his refuge, his own inner sanctum, away from the light. Jeremy had seen a photograph (a timed exposure?) of an old man on a stool, a white-haired old man in a dark room. Now suddenly it was obvious that in his pose and gestures he was mimicking the famous engraving of Leonardo Fioravanti from the frontispiece of the *Autobiography* — maybe there was room for Ferson in his book! Why not? Surely no discussion of empiricism was complete without trying to reproduce, as Ferson had claimed, the alchemist's results. No discussion, also, of charlatanism or fraud.

All of us had broken bones to heal, fevers to bring down — Arkady Ferson, originally from St. Petersburg, had understood that much at least. He had come to Seattle in the 1950s. With his followers he had moved into the big white house and published a series of occult treatises, including two at least on Fioravanti: If illness were a symptom of divine rage, then secret knowledge was God's grace. The adept would begin to glow like a metal vessel in the process of distilling — a metaphor that Ferson took quite literally, hence the sealed windows and the chambers without light.

So: a nut-job, obviously. A dead end. But Fioravanti, too, had been despised and hated by his peers, had died in poverty.

Jeremy didn't want to think about that. He really needed the Butler job. And so to distract himself he returned to his sexual fantasy, determined to organize it in a more efficient way: He would go to the house the next morning, after his triumphant interview. Sabine would have left the door unlocked. Scott was in St. Louis.

But Jeremy wouldn't climb the stairs or go to search for her up on the roof. He would find the basement, and he would bring a flashlight, and in a warren of little rooms he would find a hidden chamber, a closet, really, and on dusty shelves there would be a complete set of the 1609 edition of Fioravanti's works. Maybe there would even be a diary — Alexander would help him with the Russian translations....

No, no, no. In his hotel bedroom, Jeremy dried his hands on the bed sheets and turned over onto his side. "It is incredible how virtuous I am," he told himself.

Drained of his last erotic impulse, he gave himself up. In the bottom of Sabine's house, in a crystal — no, a carved, hinged, wooden case, he would find the only copy of the master's *Secret History*, hand written,

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never published, though referred to often in the *Autobiography* — the repository of all his alchemical wisdom.

And he would hear Sabine behind him. "What are you doing here?" And he would turn off the flashlight, leaving them in darkness. He would turn toward her, and both of them would glow with secret knowledge or nostalgia or desire. "You're beautiful," he'd say.

So many regrets. Memories like ghosts. Ah, God, he thought, suddenly sleepy — was it possible that a ghost could move through time, haunting and changing and poisoning the past?

ON THE TENTH of September the sea wall was broken in three places after a bombardment lasting thirteen days. Don Juan de Vega, the Spanish viceroy of Sicily, entered the town at four o'clock. There was a slaughter, of course, of the men who'd taken refuge in the mosque.

But by the western wall, near the gardens of Aphrodisium that had given the city its name, all was quiet at the end of the afternoon. Giordano Orsini had allotted the poor neighborhoods to his men. Fires burned there overnight. The Spanish captains had reserved for themselves the mansions of the African governors and the Turkish corsairs.

The richest house in that western district belonged to Brambarac, the African commander. Don Garcia de Toledo chose this house to sleep in. But in the evening when he arrived, he was disturbed to find the roof had collapsed during the bombardment. The upper walls were broken in. Don Garcia stood between the great stone lions at the gate. He sent his men to find another house close by.

Late as usual, and unaware of this change of plans, Leonardo Fioravanti arrived after dark. He had been working in the barracks outside the city, where there was an infirmary. For three weeks since the beginning of the siege, he had spent every hour of daylight in that place, setting broken bones, irrigating gunshot wounds with quinta essenza *and* balsamo artificiato. *Despite all efforts, many soldiers and sailors had died under his hands.*

Stinking, weary, and discouraged, he came at last to the lion gate. He had walked in darkness through the deserted roads, and everything was dark. Later he would write of this campaign to say that it was worth a

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dozen courses in the university. He would boast of his miraculous cures. But at that moment he perceived no benefit. He stood with his hand on the stone haunch of the female lion, surveying the broken building, its black, gaping windows along the front. There were no stars or moon. Torchlight came obliquely from other houses, and the sound of muffled cries.

But in the dark building nevertheless there was a glimmer of candlelight. Maybe Don Garcia was there after all, he thought, in some undamaged section of the palace. So the surgeon persevered up the long flagged path, climbed the long stone steps. And he had been wrong to think that even the front part of the house was nothing but collapsed rubble behind a more-or-less intact façade. For when he looked through the empty door, the yawning wooden casements, he saw the first-floor ceilings were still whole, and there was even a staircase leading nowhere. This he glimpsed in the candlelight, a single tiny flame that hesitated by the stair. Then it disappeared, but not before he had seen the imprint of a small naked foot in the dust — surely a woman's footprint!

"Captain!" he shouted, and then drew his sword. Who was this in the ruined house of Brambarac? News of this prince had even spread to Naples, the splendor of his gardens, the richness of his tables, and the beauty of his many wives and concubines. Maybe one of these still haunted the wrecked mansion.

Though the surgeon still hovered in the doorway, his mind moved boldly through the darkness, following the flame — she might be a Christian woman from Antwerp or Ghent or Brussels, stolen from her family by El Draghut the Corsair, then sold as a slave in the disgusting bagnios *of Algiers. Now she was homeless and without refuge in this city of infidels. How grateful she would be to any rescuer or protector, a girl scarcely grown (if you could judge by the size of her footprint), yet skilled in all the lecherous arts.*

Shouts came from up the street. The surgeon stepped over the threshold. Sword outstretched, he shuffled into the darkness, following the place in his mind where he had seen the candle flame. Among the piles of rubble he poked his way toward the back staircase. And as he moved, he imagined he saw some light back there, an orange glow reflected from a secret source — perhaps a fire burning in an inner court.

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Instead, behind the broken staircase he found a wooden stair descending to the cellars.

And at the turning of the stair he saw her — just a glimpse before she disappeared. And he was mistaken to have thought she was carrying a candle. But there was a light that glowed around her and around her hands especially, a dim, orange light.

He put up his sword, slid it back into its sheath. Part of him was too weary for this adventure. In the battle on the beach, he had taken a thrust from an African knight — that was weeks ago, and yet the wound hadn't healed. Walking downstairs was painful, and he managed it a single step at a time, descending into darkness — where was she? She had vanished ahead.

But he could hear her voice ahead of him, a little sing-song murmur gathering him on. At the second turning he went forward like a blind man, both hands outstretched. There was a stone corridor, and a stone chamber at the end of it, and what looked like a fire burning there; he couldn't tell. The witch was waiting with her back turned. She was wrapped in strips of cloth, and there was cloth over her face and hair. The light glowed around her. Limping, he reached for the cloth around her shoulders, stripped it away. Already he understood something was wrong; when she turned toward him he let out a cry. For this was no Christian beauty from the harem of Brambarac, melting with shy gratitude for her deliverance. But she was old, older than he, thirty-one or two at least, with coarse wild hair and a spot on her dark cheek. Her eyebrows were thick and tufted, and there was hair on her upper lip. She stunk of some musky perfume, an oil smeared on her body to hide her rottenness; he wasn't fooled. Limping forward, he grasped hold of her thick neck, crushing her throat before she could make a sound or summon her familiar. He pulled her down onto the floor, pressed the weight of his body into her as she flailed and thrashed — ah, God, would it ever end?

Jeremy started awake. Horrified, he sat up in bed.

Heart pounding, he put his hands to his face.

Once he had listened to a lecture on the science of dreams. In it, the professor had claimed that the central figure in a dream, or else the dominating sequence of events, could have no meaning. No, it was the furniture,

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the incidental details that were able to teach us something about ourselves. Now, awake, Jeremy saw the truth of this. In his dream-state he had grasped something his waking self had missed.

Fearfully, hesitantly, he closed his eyes again. He allowed himself to imagine the stone cellar in Brambarac's ruined palace — this time as a set devoid of actors. There was a series of stone apertures halfway up the wall. And there were bottles, old apothecary bottles with glass stoppers and hand-printed labels — oh, it was obvious. It wasn't Sabine who had mixed up some poisonous sludge as a joke to mock at him and his obsessions. Why hadn't he believed her? She had given him a bottle of Arkady Ferson's Fragrant Goddess, prepared by him and described in his 1969 treatise, the veracity of which Jeremy had always rejected out of hand.

But Ferson must have hidden some of it before he died. Naked, Jeremy jumped out of bed and searched the wastebasket where he had dropped the bottle the previous night. He twisted open the crusted lid, smelled some of the foul liquid. Was it possible the old man had dosed himself with this? Even at the time there had been speculation he'd been poisoned, murdered by some other cult member in a squabble over the foundation's vanished funds. No one had been prosecuted for the crime.

Jeremy resealed the bottle, studied the label. *Dushistaia Boginia*, it said in Cyrillic letters. Fragrant Goddess. Leonardo Fioravanti had told the story many times, how in Palermo in the 1580s he had cured the wife of the Governor of Sicily. In the middle of the street she had vomited up a hairy, mottled mass as big as a baby. Afterwards she'd been in perfect health.

That was after a single dose. If you read between the lines, it was obvious the elixir contained both arsenic and mercury — effective poisons, as Fioravanti himself had pointed out. The precise recipe, along with its various palliatives, he claimed to have recorded in the *Secret History*. He did not publish them in the *Autobiography*, or any of his other books. Dying in poverty in Rome, why should he bequeath to an ungrateful world the secret of these miraculous cures, discovered and refined with so much difficulty?

Why indeed? But there was no time for Jeremy to think about these things. He was already late. He showered, put on his suit, went downstairs for his interview at nine o'clock.

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The search committee had a room at the conference. He knocked on the door of a sixth-floor suite in the same hotel. Besides some armchairs and the woman he was supposed to meet, there was a bed with a shiny quilt and a mountain of pillows.

Often he was good at interviews, but not this morning. He found himself distracted by a notion that was almost entirely a fantasy — was it possible that Arkady Ferson had discovered or acquired the *Secret History*, used its formulae to make a batch of Fragrant Goddess and the other cures? No, it was not possible — the manuscript had never been found. There was no reason, independent of Fioravanti's claims, to assume it had ever existed. And surely, if it had come into his possession, in Brussels or St. Petersburg, perhaps, Ferson would have boasted of it, written about it in his idiotic treatises, sold it when he was short of cash.

Still, at the same time was it credible that Ferson would have drunk the contents of the screw-top bottle if he hadn't at least thought his recipe was genuine? But what an idiot! These ancient manuscripts, discovered at long last, always turned out to be forgeries. What had Sabine said? "Some books and so."

Okay, so maybe Ferson had discovered something, purchased something that turned out to be a fake. Then maybe he had poisoned himself out of stupidity or else despair. Or else he had died of natural causes — that was obviously a possibility, and the screw-top bottle had been prepared as something to impress the Lightbearers, one of a long sequence of frauds: Ferson and Fioravanti were one of a kind! And if Ferson hadn't said anything about the manuscript, it was for the same reason Fioravanti had destroyed it or never written it — the desire for alchemical or secret knowledge, the conviction that secrecy was a prerequisite for holiness or truth. These men weren't professionals like Jeremy, who even now was plotting out an article on this entire subject, a publishable article that would enable him to ace his interview with Butler College, which at this exact same moment he was in the process of blowing with his disjointed and distracted answers to the most basic questions — the woman was looking at him as if he'd lost his mind. They sat in circular armchairs and she stared at him. Had she heard anything about him, any rumor of misconduct? She was attractive, too, in a sharp sort of way, her blond hair

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pulled back. Sensible skirt. He'd like to have her on this bed with all the pillows. Had anyone slept in it the previous night?

His interview lasted forty-five minutes. When it was over and the door had closed behind him, he scarcely remembered what he'd said. Maybe he had made self-deprecating jokes. Maybe he'd discussed his thesis, summarizing it poorly, because his mind was elsewhere and (it now occurred to him) whole sections had to be rewritten. He stood in the hallway looking at an immense potted plant, thinking that if a man were lucky, his secret history would die with him, the submerged causes and poisonous events. His autobiography would not include them, or anything else that made him special or unique. All that could be pieced together, as if by policemen or detectives searching for clues. That was true for Fioravanti, and Arkady Ferson, and Jeremy as well.

He limped along the blue carpet toward the elevator. Someone passed him, a woman hurrying toward the interview he'd just left. Doubtless she'd do better; she was younger, certainly. Just out of graduate school.

He took the elevator to the ground floor and limped out into the street. Another glorious June day. Where had everything gone wrong? People passed him and they couldn't tell. How could they know? A man in a suit: How could they tell that everything was finished, gone, done? How could they know that it was only just a matter of time before it all fell apart, and he was punished as he deserved? Things had started out so well.

But Fioravanti, too, had had this experience — in Naples, Venice, and Madrid, his career had followed the same trajectory. He had acquired aristocratic patrons, stunned the city with his cures. But then the doctors and professors had conspired to drive him out, ruin him — it was always the same. In Jeremy's case, it was Joanna who had broken him — quite literally on the Merritt Parkway. He'd never been the same after that. He'd taken a medical leave of absence. That was when his thesis had gone wrong, his teaching, too.

She had broken him and then abandoned him. Now she was dead. The police, when they'd come to talk to him, had been like children or like stupid undergraduates, never asking the right questions.

In the pocket of his coat, his fingers closed around Arkady Ferson's bottle. He pulled it out, examined the penciled script. Then he turned uphill toward the art museum and Sabine's house. As he climbed, he

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labored to put these thoughts behind him, all these ways of blaming others for his own mistakes. They were part of the secret history, which had never been recorded, or else had been destroyed, and which in any case was even less reliable than what you saw on the outside, where fraud could be challenged and ascertained.

He came into the neighborhood of prosperous houses, bigger and bigger as he climbed uphill. At the top he came to Sabine's house with its bronze guardians. He'd stopped only once, on Broadway, to buy a flashlight in a Walgreens near the Jimi Hendrix statue. Now he stood between the foo dogs with Ferson's bottle in one hand and the flashlight in the other; he limped up the steps. And the door was unlocked, and the house was in shadow, and he moved through the atrium to the stairwell at the back of the house, under the Tiffany window.

"*Qui est là? Sophie, est-ce que c'est toi?*" But he found the doors and climbed down into the Lightbearers' domain, where Arkady Ferson had lived out his fraudulent life, met his fraudulent end.

He switched on his flashlight, made the turning of the stair. Then he was in among the small dark rooms, some with mattresses still on the floor. This is where the Lightbearers had lived, indulged their superstitions and their mad old master. This was where Sabine had followed in their footsteps; she had always been interested in astrology and things like that. Low ceilings, cheap particleboard smelling of mildew, but even so he could make out a scent of lavender and incense — it led him on. Sabine, of course, was behind him at the top of the stairs. "Who are you down there? I will call the police!" — who indeed? It wasn't the first time someone had made that threat.

Small dusty objects skewered by the flashlight's trembling beam. Where was he? What did he expect to find? Sabine was behind him. He could hear her footsteps.

And then he came to the end, a square room with a single entrance. Stone walls ahead, the foundation wall. An industrial carpet. A four-poster bed with a canopy. A bookcase. Some books and so.

Sabine was behind him. She was at the door. Brave girl — "What are you doing here? Why are you here?"

Holding up the light, he turned to look at her. He couldn't tell if she could see his face. Maybe she thought she'd recognized him, but now she

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wasn't sure. But it was possible she could see some of his secret essence, because he'd scared her. He was not what he pretended and she knew it; she looked terrified. He painted her face, stroked her body with the light. She was dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans, cowboy boots. A gold necklace. Gold earrings. Yellow hair pulled back. She squinted, held up her hand.

"You're beautiful," he said. Nothing else — he didn't have to say anything else. But he came toward her, smiling, the bottle in one hand, the flashlight in the other. Her old friend; she had kissed him once. Did she remember?

The flashlight gave him an advantage and he turned it off, leaving them in darkness. Then he dropped it and the bottle too, stepped toward her with his hands held out. He saw nothing as he reached out toward her. But then he could hear her fumbling for the door. He jumped forward and she closed the door on him and closed the bolt.

The darkness made him dizzy. He fell to the floor onto his hands and knees, groping for the light. He dug his fingers into the heavy carpet. Had the Lightbearers locked Arkady Ferson in here, shut him up like an animal until he died? The flashlight had rolled away someplace, was nowhere to be found. But his hand fell on the screw-top bottle. He sat up cross-legged with the bottle in his lap.

Maybe Sabine was already calling the police. Maybe he didn't have much time. But he had always been a quick study. In the darkness he was already developing the skills of a blind man, whose other senses grow to compensate; his ears were ringing. His fingertips, stroking the glass bottle, picking at the lid, were perfectly sensitive to texture and to temperature. And he could smell Sabine's lavender perfume, which masked a darker, musky odor.

As he waited, it occurred to him he did see something after all, a little gathering of light in the far corner of the wall.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED AT THE ZOMBIE JAMBOREE

Film scholars have asserted that zombie movies are one of the few horror subgenres to burst (or lumber) directly from real-life — that is, Anglo perceptions and misconceptions of Haitian "voodoo" African-based religion — onto the stage and silver screen, without first passing through the filter of a fictional literary tradition.

While that may be true, it is also true that the zombie film has evolved over the years in ways that have absolutely nothing to do with its Haitian forebears. (It's been a while since I've seen a Vodoun priest as a major character in a zombie flick. But then again, maybe I just don't do enough poring over the straight-to-DVD shelf.)

What is a more common component of cinematic zombie fables over the last seventy-five years or so is their penchant for allegory. Zombie plots have been used to comment upon everything from the exploitation of the working class to the perils of pollution to the existential isolation of modern man to the brain-numbing dangers of a consumer culture.

Still, with its descent into videogame-inspired action schlock with *Resident Evil* (2002), and into unnecessary remakes, like 2004's *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombie formula seemed to have run out of steam. That old zombie finally starved to death. Or so I thought, until the several sons of Hammer brought the genre roaring back to life in Britain.

The more farcical variation upon the theme came in the form of Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's ghoulishly hilarious *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). And in the dramatic school of zombiedom came a marvelously

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suspenseful and involving movie called *28 Days Later* (2002).

Written by Alex Garland *(The Beach)* and directed by Danny Boyle *(Trainspotting)*, the DV-shot feature felt fresh and original despite the familiar themes and frequent homage bits to *A Clockwork Orange*, *Day of the Triffids*, and the work of zombie-king George A. Romero.

In a world paranoid about the dangers of HIV, SARS, Ebola, Mad Cow, and a dozen other possible plagues, the *28 Days Later* action begins in a London lab where well-intentioned animal rights activists pave their nation's road to hell by releasing chimpanzees stricken with a virus called "the Rage" that is easily transmitted through blood and saliva. Victims are, in less than a minute (!), transformed into bloodthirsty, hyper-violent killing machines. And they move a heck of a lot faster than your old-time zombies.

Before long, few uninfected humans are left in London town. Among them is a young bike messenger named Jim (Cillian Murphy) who awakens from a coma in a hospital to find the facility and much of the city deserted. Before long he is fleeing a zombie priest (of the Anglican, not Vodoun, variety) and teaming up with two other survivors, Mark (Noah Huntley), and Selena (Naomie Harris), who clue him in on the kill-or-be-killed rules of survival in a Rage-ridden world.

Although there is lots of bloody action, tension, and dread to *28 Days Later*, what I liked best was the film's willingness to allow the central characters their humanity, and to allow both characters and audience members to find momentary relief in moments of humor, tenderness, and even natural beauty.

Jim, Selena, and a Father-Daughter team with whom they eventually join forces, Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and Hannah (Megan Burns), are much more than stock characters, and *28 Days* actually lets us care about them. Which, of course, makes it so much more distressing when virus or violence befalls one or more of them.

As for social commentary, *28 Days* doesn't lay it on too thick. It taps our fears of modern pandemic, and beyond that simply seems to observe that "normalcy" on the "diseased little island" of England always had been predicated on violence and destruction. No surprise, then, that when a small band of stiff upper-lipped military men with whom our heroes meet up seem intent on starting a "new

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civilization," they have no qualms about basing their new Eden on absolute domination and sexual slavery.

The brave and cynical Selena advises Jim early on that "staying alive is as good as it gets." But neither she nor the film *28 Days Later* really believes that. Or, at least, they feel mightily conflicted about that conclusion. And for proof, you need look no further than the two endings given to the film in theaters, and the total of four that can now be viewed on the DVD. The theatrical release primary ending was the most upbeat and hopeful — and was completely free of bloodthirsty demons. Late in the theatrical release the filmmakers added an alternate armed-chicks-in-bloody-red-dresses finale at the end of the credits for those with a more pessimistic slant. And two additional possible conclusions are offered on the DVD.

Garland and Boyle (who are frequent collaborators) contemplated with their numerous *28 Days Later* denouements a full spectrum of possibilities from the quasi-idyllic to the harshly resolute. But none of their endings, tellingly, abandoned hope altogether.

Perhaps this was merely to allow for the inevitable sequel, which was, of course, guaranteed by the success of the first film. But you have to respect the fact that Garland, Boyle, and their production team decided that any sequel needed a fresh approach. So they courted a young Spanish filmmaker, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo *(Intacto)*, and let him and his writing team — which consisted of a first draft by Rowan Joffe *(Last Resort)*, and follow-up work by Fresnadillo, his Spanish producing partner Enrique López-Lavigne, and writer Jesús Olmo — to go where they wanted with the basic concepts established in *28 Days Later.*

And it turns out that where they wanted to take dear London was to a very dark place indeed!

The tone, the look, the energy level, and the overall gore factor in *28 Weeks Later* is nothing like that of its predecessor. For those who felt that *28 Days Later* wasn't gruesome enough to be a true horror flick, you will likely enjoy the splatter-fest that Mr. Fresnadillo offers much better.

Personally, I am one of those people who prefer suspense to splatter, but I can nonetheless appreciate the slaughterous delights of Mr. Fresnadillo's gut-wrenching ride.

Although most of the action occurs six months after the initial

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Rage outbreak, the film opens with a scene concurrent with the first film's action. Selena, Jim, et al., are no longer the focus. Instead, we open on a loving couple preparing a meal in a darkened kitchen. Don (Robert Carlyle) and Alice (Catherine McCormack) are holed up in a rural house with an old couple and two younger adults. But before long a horde of infected, highly determined ghouls are breaking through their barricades. What ensues is a heart-pounding scene in which Don shows what kind of man he is. And we learn that in a moment of life-or-death panic he can think of nothing but his own survival. He leaves his poor devoted wife to be savaged and runs like hell.

Fast forward six months and the infected have long since died of starvation and the few survivors have passed quarantine. A U.S.-led NATO force has now begun a process of reconstruction and repatriation in Britain. Among the haunted survivors is our cowardly friend, Don, who works maintenance within the protected Green Zone on London's Isle of Dogs. Don's two children, a young boy, Andy (Mackintosh Muggleton), and his teenaged sister, Tammy (Imogen Poots) have just arrived back in London after being conveniently away on a school trip to Spain when the outbreak decimated their country.

Don, understandably, isn't completely honest with his children about the death of their mother. And it is his guilt, cowardice, and dishonesty (as well as his convenient security swipe pass) that directly and indirectly leads to fresh and so-very-bloody disaster. That and the total incompetence of the short-sighted American military commanders in their attempt to bring peace and order to another country.

Are you starting to see that the allegorical nature of the zombie movie has made an impressive come-back in *28 Weeks Later*? Bless its heart, Fresnadillo's film is best enjoyed — by me, at least — as an indictment of the American quagmire in Iraq.

I almost laughed out loud when an army escort tells a trainload of returning Brits — lambs to the slaughter that they are — that there are no fears as they enter the Green Zone, because the "the U.S. Army is here to protect you." Indeed, all hell breaks loose shortly thereafter. And when they are unable to control the violent chaos, the Army command overreacts with horrifying violence of their own: sniping,

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firebombing, poison-gassing, and torching the innocent along with the infected.

The film is careful to show that not all Americans are idiots. In fact, the focal characters in *28 Weeks Later* are (besides Don's children) an American medical officer, Scarlet (Rose Byrne), who is as smart as she is compassionate, and a sniper with a conscience who attempts to lead Scarlet and her charges out of the city. Sergeant Doyle (Jeremy Renner) may be a macho tough guy, but he also happens to be genuinely brave and capable of self-sacrifice for the greater good.

Just don't get too attached to any of these folks. Their outlook is looking bleak....as is the outlook for the rest of the planet.

Perhaps it is this sense of doom that keeps Fresnadillo and his writers from completely developing their characters. More likely it is simply that character development would take precious minutes away from the stomach-turning anxiety he hopes to maintain in his viewers for a full hour and a half.

As previously indicated, those horror aficionados who thought Garland and Boyle were too soft are unlikely to think the same of Mr. Fresnadillo and his unrelenting sequel. He and his D. P., Enrique Chediak, get up close and personal with their carnage. Their handheld cameras seem to be infected, too, as they ricochet through the bloody mayhem of an outbreak. And if you were hoping that, just for fun, a helicopter pilot would slice and dice a hundred or so zombies with his chopper blades, well, I don't think I'll be spoiling the nuance of the story by telling you that you won't be disappointed.

The high-octane horror of *28 Weeks Later* is not for the faint of heart, or those who believe in peace in our time. (Nor is it for those poor deluded souls who feel certain that "there will always be an England.") But those who like nothing better than an extended metaphor along with their blood'n'guts, then *28 Weeks Later* might be just your cuppa tea. Or should I say glass of sangria?

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With the passel of stories he has published in our pages and in Asimov's *over the last three years, Daryl Gregory has become one of the field's rising stars. His first novel,* Pandemonium *is due out next year; he describes it as a book about demonic possession, Jungian archetypes, and golden age comics. His latest story has no relation to comics that we could discern, but enthusiasts of children's fiction will probably find much of interest here...as will, we hope, all our other readers.*

Unpossible

By Daryl Gregory

TWO IN THE MORNING AND he's stumbling around in the attic, lost in horizontal archaeology: the further he goes, the older the artifacts become. The stuttering flashlight guides him past boxes of Christmas decorations and half-dead appliances, past garbage bags of old blankets and outgrown clothing stacked and bulging like black snowmen, over and around the twenty-year-old rubble of his son's treasures: Tonka trucks and science fair projects, soccer trophies and summer camp pottery.

His shoulder brushes against the upright rail of a dissassembled crib, sends it sliding, and somewhere in the dark a mirror or storm window smashes. The noise doesn't matter. There's no one in the house below him to disturb.

Twenty feet from the far wall his way is blocked by a heap of wicker lawn furniture. He pulls apart the barricade piece by piece to make a narrow passage and scrapes through, straws tugging at his shirt. On the other side he crawls up and onto the back of a tilting oak desk immovable as a ship run aground.

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The territory ahead is littered with the remains of his youth, the evidence of his life before he brought his wife and son to this house. Stacks of hardcover books, boxes of dusty-framed elementary school pictures — and toys. So many toys. Once upon a time he was the boy who didn't like to go outside, the boy who never wanted to leave his room. The Boy Who Always Said No.

Against the far wall, beside a rickety shelf of dried-out paint cans and rusting hardware, a drop cloth covers a suggestive shape. He picks his way through the crowded space. When he pulls aside the cloth, he grunts as if he's been elbowed in the stomach — relief and dread and wrenching sadness competing for the same throat.

Dust coats the Wonder Bike's red fenders, rust freckles its handlebars. The white-walled tires are flat, and stuffing sprouts from cracks in the leather saddle. But it's still here, still safe. And the two accessories he most needs, the things he'd almost convinced himself he'd imagined, are fastened to their places on the swooping crossbar: the five-pronged gearshift like a metal hand; and the glass-covered compass, its face scuffed white but uncracked.

The bike's heavier than he remembers, all old-fashioned steel, more solid than anything they'd bother to make today. He heaves it onto his shoulder and makes his way toward the attic door, handlebars snagging on unseen junk, errant wheels triggering miniature avalanches. Sweat pours down his back. He thinks about heart attacks. He's fifty-six now, a middle-aged man if he lives to a hundred and twelve. People younger than that die all the time. All the time.

The weight of the bike drags him down the attic stairs. He wheels it whinging down the hall, then out the front door and across the frost-crackled lawn, aiming for the realtor sign. The sweat on his neck turns cold. Along the street his neighbors' houses are all dark. The moon stays tucked into its bed of clouds. He's grateful for the privacy. He lifts the front wheel and runs over the FOR SALE sign, flattens it.

In the garage he sets to work removing the accessories. The screws are rusted into place, so he puts aside the screwdriver and plugs in the power drill. The shifter comes free, but the screws holding the compass are stripped, spinning uselessly. He can't risk hammering it off, so he works a hacksaw blade between the handlebars and the bottom of the device and

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cuts it free. Gently he sets the Wonder Bike against the garage wall and gets into the car.

It takes much less time to attach the accessories to the dash. He screws them directly into the plastic, side by side above the radio.

He starts the engine and stares out the dirt-streaked windshield, trying to remember what to do next. It used to be automatic: pedal hard, thumb the gears, follow the compass. But something happened when he turned thirteen. He lost the knack and the bike stopped working for him. Or maybe, he's been thinking lately, he stopped working for the bike.

He sets the DeShifter to NOT RECOMMENDED. He taps the glass of the UnCompass and the needle quivers, stuck between UNFAMILIAR and UNKNOWN.

Sounds about right, he thinks.

EVEN WITH THE COMPASS it takes determination to get lost. He drives south out of town, past the tangle of interstate exchanges, toward the green empty parts of the map. He turns down the first road he doesn't recognize. He pays no attention to street names; he looks away when signs appear in his headlights.

Soon there are no signs. Forest swallows the highway. Switchbacks and the skulking moon conspire with him to disguise his direction.

Don't look in the rearview mirror, he tells himself. No trail of bread crumbs. As soon as he thinks of the road behind him, he realizes he left the front door of the house wide open. Maybe by morning robbers will have emptied the place. That would make it easier on the real estate agents. Too much clutter, they'd told him. They couldn't see that the home had been gutted a year ago.

He rolls down the window and lets the cold wind buffet him. When did he fall out of love with speed? He'd had adventures once. He'd rescued the Pumpkinhead Boys, raced the moto-crows, reunited the shards of the Glass Kingdom. His quick thinking had outwitted the Hundred Mayors of Stilt Town.

He nudges the DeShifter past INADVISABLE to ABSOLUTELY NOT and accelerates. The road ahead doesn't exist until it appears under his

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headlights; he's driving a plow of light through the dark, unrolling the road before him like a carpet.

A tiny yellow sign flashes past his right fender, too fast for him to read. He glances sideways — nothing but the dark — and turns back to the road just as the little purple house appears in his lights like a phantom.

The structure strikes the grille and explodes into a thousand pieces. The windshield pocks with white stars. He stomps on the brake and the car bucks, slides sideways. He jerks the wheel back to the right and suddenly the car's off the road, jouncing across ground. He bounces against the roof, ragdolling, unable to hold onto the wheel. The car bangs sideways against something invisible and immovable and then everything stops.

He stares out the cratered windshield. The engine coughs politely, shudders, and dies.

The DeShifter shows COMPLETELY OUT OF THE QUESTION. The UnCompass needle points straight at UNPOSSIBLE.

Later — he's as unsure of time as he is of location — he forces the car door open, pushing against tree limbs and thick brush, and climbs out and down. The driver-side wheels are two feet in the air. Trees surround the car as if they'd grown up around it.

He walks up a slight incline to the road, his pulse driving a headache deeper into his temples. The muscles of his neck burn; his chest aches where the seatbelt cut into him.

The surface of the road is littered with shattered plywood — and bits of silver. He stoops, drumming fresh pain into his head, and picks up a dime. There are coins all over the roadway.

The only thing remaining of the tollbooth is another of the child-sized yellow signs, miraculously erect: PLEASE HAVE YOUR DESTINATION IN MIND.

He drops the dime into his pocket and starts walking.

A farmhouse squats in the middle of the highway like a great toad, filling both lanes. He walks toward it in the inconstant moonlight, horrified. If he hadn't struck the tollbooth, he'd have slammed into the house at eighty miles per hour.

On closer inspection the house looks like it's been dropped there from a great height. Walls are askew, their wooden siding bowed, splintered, or blown out completely. Roofs cant at contrary angles.

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He steps onto the porch and floorboards creak and shift under his weight like unstable ice. High-pitched barking erupts from inside. He knocks on the door and waits, hunched and shivering. A minute passes. The dog — a small, hyperactive thing by the sound of it — barks and barks.

He crouches next to the closest window but gauzy curtains obscure the view. He makes out a lamp, the suggestion of a couch, a dark rectangle that could be a bookshelf or a wardrobe. His teeth are on the edge of chattering.

He knocks again and sends the dog into fresh vocal frenzy. He considers trying the doorknob. It's warm in there. There could be a phone. How big can the dog be?

He backs off the porch and walks around the side of the house. It's nearly pitch black back there; the roof blocks the moon, and the windows at the back of the house, if there are windows at all, are unlit. He can't even tell if the road continues on the side. He moves in what he thinks is an arc, feeling for the scrape of pavement under his shoes, when suddenly he bangs his toes against something low and hard and stumbles forward. He catches his balance — and freezes, realizing where he's standing. He's in the middle of train tracks.

He doesn't hear anything, doesn't see anything but the eye-swallowing dark. Slowly he steps back over the rails, a chill in his stomach even though he'd see a train coming for miles.

The dog resumes barking, and the sound is different somehow. He circles around to the front of the house and sees that the front door is open now, light spilling around some dark shape filling the doorway.

"Hello?" he says. He holds out his hands as he steps toward the door. "I — I had a slight accident. A couple miles down the road."

"You came by car?" A woman's voice, low and rasping.

"I had an accident," he says again. "If you've got a phone, I could call someone...."

"The road's closed to your type." He's not sure if she's warning him or merely stating fact. Her shadow recedes. After a moment he approaches the door.

The dog, a tiny black terrier with an age-whitened snout, lies in a towel-lined wicker basket a few feet from the door. It bares its teeth at him and growls, but makes no move to leave its bed. He steps inside the room.

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The woman's already sitting, leaning back in an old leather armchair the color of dried mud. The light is behind her so again her face is in shadow. She crosses her legs, sharp white shins over blood-red slippers. She pulls a foil pack from the pocket of her blue-checked housedress and taps out a cigarette.

He folds his arms across his chest and tries to stop shivering. At least the house is warm. He looks around for a phone but knows he won't find one—it's not that kind of house. It's been a long time, but the old instincts are coming back. He smiles thinly. "And what type would that be, ma'am?"

"Storm-chaser," she says. "Wardrobe-jumper." She flicks a cheap plastic lighter and holds the flame to the cigarette. "Mirror shards sticking to your coat, twigs in your hair. Little hard to squeeze that big ol' man-body through the hedgerow, eh?"

"You don't know me. You don't know who I am."

"Oh my goodness, you must be the *special* one," she says in mock recognition. "You must be the only traveler to see *lands beyond*." She taps cigarette ash onto the braided rug. "Let me guess — enchanted sailboat? Magic choo-choo train? Oh, that's right, you're a driver — electric kiddie car, then. The tollbooth boy."

"I had a bicycle," he says. "The most wonderful — "

She groans. "Spare me." She inhales on her cigarette, shakes her head. "At least you got rid of it. Most of you can't find your way back without the props." She sees his frown and laughs. Smoke spills from her mouth and hazes the lights.

"You think you're the first one to try to sneak back in?" she says. "You're not even the first one *tonight*." She laughs again. "Boo-hoo-hoo, my wife left me, whaaa, my daughters hate me. Life is meaningless, I'm gonna kill myself."

"I don't have a daughter," he says. "And my wife didn't leave me." But of course she had. She left him in the most absolute way, leaving behind a note like a set of driving directions, like a travel brochure to an exotic country. Two years later to the day, their son followed her. Tonight, come to think of it, is the anniversary of their deaths.

He takes a breath. "I'm just looking for a way back."

"Please. You couldn't find your shadow if it was stapled on. You think

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you can just waltz right back in there nursing your disappointments and diseases, your head stuffed full of middle-age sex fantasies and mortgage payments? You'd ruin everything. You'd stink the place up."

"You don't understand," he says. "I only need — "

"Stink. It. Up." She makes a tired shooing gesture. "Go home, you greedy little boy. No second helpings. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

This is a test, he thinks. She's trying to throw him off, weigh him down with doubt and discouragement. He's met such trials before, and persevered. Once upon a time he was The Boy Who Always Said No.

As if in confirmation he hears a distant bell, a cheery *ding ding!* He recognizes that sound. He strides out of the room, into the dark kitchen, and flips open the hook to the back door.

"You'll never get on!" the woman calls. The dog begins to bark.

The dark, to his light-adjusted eyes, seems almost solid. He stops a few feet from the house and listens. The trolley must be close by. The little bell sounds again, but he can't tell if it's growing closer or more distant.

He moves forward slowly, arms out, feet sliding forward. The track is only a few yards from the house, he's sure of it. His feet drag through the unseen grass. After a few minutes he glances back, but now the house is gone as well. He turns in place, eyes wide. There's no sound, not even barking. A dank, dead-fish scent twists in the air.

When he completes his circle he notices a dark, fuzzed shape in the distance, barely distinguishable against a black sky edging toward indigo. It's the first hint since he left the attic that the night is not endless. He doesn't know what it is in the distance, but he recognizes the shape for what it is: unfamiliar, unknown.

THE LITTLE BOAT lies at the bottom of the empty seabed, abandoned midway between the shore and the island. Sandy mud sucks at his shoes. He walks toward it, past stacks of smooth-headed boulders and stinking saltwater puddles in the shape of great clawed feet. He walks under a sky the color of pencil lead.

The island is shaped like a bowler hat. If not for the trees — a handful of curve-backed palms with outrageously broad leaves — and for the

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hunched figure silhouetted at the very crown of the hill, he'd have thought the island was huge but miles away. Instead he can see that it's ridiculously small, like a cartoon desert island.

He reaches the boat and rests a hand on the gunwales. The inside of the boat is an unmade bed, a white pillow and blue blankets and white sheets. Foot-shaped holes, human-size, stamp away from the boat toward the island. He follows them across the drained sea to the rim of the island, where his predecessor's mud-laden feet begin to print the grass. The trail leads up the slope, between bushes tinged yellow and brown. Only a few of the palm trees are standing; dozens of others are uprooted and lying on the ground, or else split and bent, as if savaged by a hurricane.

He climbs, breath ragged in his throat. The man at the top of the hill is facing away, toward the lightening sky. On his back is some kind of white fur shawl — no, a suit like a child's footie pajamas, arms tied around his neck. The yawning hood is a wolf's head that's too small for his grown-man's head.

He's huffing, making a lot of noise as he approaches, but the man with the wolf suit doesn't turn around.

When he's caught his breath he says, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Above them the sky is fitful gray, but across the vast, empty sea in the land beyond, sunlight sparkles on the crystal minarets of the Glassine Palace. A great-winged roc dangling a gondola from its claws flaps toward its next fare. The rolling hills beyond the city are golden and ripe for harvest. It's all as he remembers.

"Look at those wild things go," the man in the wolf suit says. Who knows what he's seeing?

The sun crawls higher, but the clouds above the hill refuse to disperse. He glances at the man in the wolf suit, looks away. Tears have cut tracks down his muddy and unshaven face. The wolf man's older than he, but not by much.

What did the woman in the house say? *Not even the first one tonight.*

He nods at the man's wedding ring and says, "Can't take it off either?"

The man frowns at it. "Left me six months ago. I had it coming for years." He smiles faintly. "Couldn't quite stop making mischief. You?"

"She died a few years ago." But the damage hadn't stopped there, had it? He tilts his head, a half shrug. "Depression runs in her family."

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"Sorry to hear that." He slowly shakes his head, and the upside-down wolf's head wags with him. "It's a disaster out there. Every day like an eraser. Days into months, months into years — gone, gone, gone." The man in the wolf suit stares at him without blinking. "Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you were having a happy ending."

"No." He almost grins. "Not even close." But was that true? He'd had a dozen happy endings. A score of them.

Together they stare across the ocean of mud and squint into the brightness beyond.

"We can't get back in there," he says to the man with the suit. He's surprised by his certainty. But he can't imagine tracking that muck across the crystal streets. "And we can't stay here." He rubs a hand across his mouth. "Come with me."

The man doesn't answer.

"I could make you leave."

The man in the wolf suit laughs. "Don't you know who I am?" he says. "I'm their king!"

"No," he says. "Not anymore." He grips the edges of the white fur and yanks it over the man's head and off, quick as a magic trick. "I'm the king now."

He runs down the hill holding the suit above his head like a flag. The man roars a terrible roar. It's a chase down to the sea's edge and then they're tumbling in the muck, wrapped up and rolling like bear cubs, choking and half-blinded in mud. Hands claw for the suit. They tug it back and forth, the cloth rasping as threads stretch and tear. Then the zipper snaps and they fall away from each other, splash down on their asses.

They look at each other, too winded to get up.

The man clutches the scrap of fur he's regained. It's not white anymore. "Why'd you *do* that?" he says.

He's not sure. He flicks mud from his hands, wipes a hand clean on the inside of his shirt, runs a knuckle across his mouth. "It was the only thing I could think of."

The man looks at him. A smile works at the corners of his mud-spattered mouth. He makes a sound like a cough, and then he's laughing, they're both laughing. They sit in the mud, roaring.

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Eventually they help each other out of the muck. "We screwed it up," the man says. "How did we screw it up?"

He's been wondering that himself for a long time. "I don't think we were supposed to keep them safe," he answers. He hands him the remnant of the suit. "This, the bed, the Wonder Bike — all that stuff. We weren't supposed to *hoard* them."

The man looks stricken. "What?"

"We were supposed to give them away."

"Oh my God," the man says quietly. "Oh my God."

They begin to trudge across the drained sea. They trade stories about their adventures. The man with the wolf suit takes out his wallet and shows him pictures. He has a granddaughter he's never met, six years old, a real hellion by all accounts. "She lives three states away," he says.

A dozen yards from the shore they see the trolley. The little car glides smoothly around the perimeter of the lake and stops in their path. It rolls a few feet forward, a few feet back. *Ding ding!*

They approach it carefully and without speaking, as they would a deer at a watering hole. It trembles as they step up onto the gleaming sideboards. They sit on the polished wooden benches. It's a shame their clothes are so filthy.

The trolley doesn't move.

"Wait," he says, and the man in the wolf suit watches him dig into his pocket. The dime he found on the roadway is still there. The coin clinks into the tin fare box and the car jerks into motion. Soon they're zipping across the plain toward the forest and the black ribbon of highway.

"And yourself?" the man with the suit says.

"No grandchildren," he says. "No children. Not anymore."

The man frowns and nods. "We'll find someone for the bike," he says. "The world is full of children."

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From his home in Philadelphia, Mr. Swanwick reports that he is just about to leave for a trip to Chengdu in Szechuan Province, China. His latest story collection, The Dog Said Bow-Wow, *is due out this fall and a new novel,* The Dragons of Babel, *is due in January. He says that "Urdumheim" is a creation myth told by the inhabitants of that new novel — but don't expect to find it in the book. Its only publication is here, in the copy you hold in your hands or on your PDA.*

Urdumheim

By Michael Swanwick

EVERY MORNING KING Nimrod walked to the mountain, climbed its steep sides to the very top, and sang it higher. At noon ravens brought him bread and cheese. At dinner time they brought him manna. At sunset he came down. He had called the granite up from under the ground shortly after Utnapishtim the Navigator landed the boats there. First Inanna had called upon her powers to put the rains to sleep. Then Shaleb the Scribe had picked up a stick and scratched a straight line in the mud, indicating simply: *We are here.* Thus did history begin.

But before history existed, before time began, King Nimrod led the People out of Urdumheim. Across the stunned and empty spaces of the world they fled, through the plains and over the silent snowy mountains, not knowing if these places had existed before then or if their need and desire had pulled them into being. The land was as large as the sky in those days, and as unpopulated. But in no place could they linger, for always their enemies were close on their heels, eager to return them to slavery.

So came they at last to the limitless salt marshes that lay between the

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land and the distant sea. It was a time of great floods, when the waters poured endlessly from the heavens and the grass-choked streams were become mighty rivers and there was no dry ground anywhere to be seen. They built shallow-drafted reed boats then, well-pitched beneath, and set across the waters, where no demon could follow. Skimming swiftly over the drowned lands, they drove into the white rains, seeking refuge. Until at last they came upon what was then an island barely distinguishable from the waters. Here they settled, and here they prospered.

They were giants, that first generation, and half the things in the world were made by them first. Utnapishtim invented boats and navigation. Shaleb invented writing and record-keeping. Inanna invented weaving and the arts of lovemaking. Nimrod himself was responsible for bridges, houses, coins, and stoneworking, as well as cultivation and animal husbandry and many other things. But greatest of all his inventions was language. The People could not speak before he taught them how.

I was a boy when the winged lion came. That morning, Ninsun had set me to work pitting cherries. It was a tedious, fiddling chore, and because Ninsun had gathered four bushels, it lasted for hours, but there was no way out of it. So as I labored, I asked her questions about the way things used to be and why things were as they are now. Of all the First, she was the least closemouthed. Which is not to say she was at all talkative.

"Why is there work?" I asked.

"Because we are lucky."

It didn't seem lucky to me to have to work, and I said so.

"Work makes sense. You labor, you grow tired. You make something, you're better off than you were before. Imagine the world if it weren't that way."

"What was the world like before the People came here?"

"There are no words to describe it."

"Why not?"

"Because there was no language. Nimrod invented language as a way for us to escape from Urdumheim."

"What was Urdumheim like?"

"King Nimrod gave it that name afterward so we could talk about it. When we lived there, it wasn't called anything."

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"But what was it *like*?"

She looked at me without answering. Then abruptly she opened her mouth in a great O. The interior of her mouth was blacker than soot, blacker than midnight, black beyond imagining. That horrible hole in reality opened wider and wider, growing until it was larger than her face, larger than the room, until it threatened to swallow me up and along with me the entire village and King Nimrod's mountain and all the universe beyond. There were flames within the darkness, though they shed no light, and cold mud underfoot. My stomach lurched and I was overcome by a pervasive sense of wrongness. It seemed to me that I had no name and that it was thus impossible to distinguish between myself and everything else, and that therefore I could by definition never, ever escape from this dreadful and malodorous place.

Ninsun closed her mouth. "It was like that." The clay pot where we dumped the discarded pits was full, so she tossed them out the window. "This is almost done. When we're finished here, you can run along and play."

I DON'T THINK that Ninsun was my mother, but who can tell? We had not invented parentage at that time. No one had ever died, and thus no one had foreseen the need to record the passing of generations. Children were simply raised in common, their needs seen to by whoever was closest.

Nor was I the child Ninsun thought me. True, when she released me at last, I did indeed react exactly as a child would in the same circumstances. Which is to say, I was out the door in an instant and hurtling across the fields so fast that a shout to come back would never have reached my ears. My reasons, however, were not those of a boy but of a man, albeit a young one still.

I plunged into the woods and cool green shadows flowed over my body. Only when I could no longer hear the homely village noises of Whitemarsh, the clang of metal in the smithy and the snore of wood at the sawyer's, did I slow to a walk.

Whitemarsh was one of seven villages on an archipelago of low hills that rose gently from the reeds. On Great Island were Landfall,

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Providence, and First Haven. Farther out on islands of their own were Whitemarsh, Fishweir, Oak Hill, and Market. Other, smaller communities there were, some consisting of as few as three or two houses, in such profusion that no man knew them all. But the chief and more populous islands were connected by marsh-roads of poured sand paved with squared-off logs.

By secret ways known only to children (though I was no longer a child, I had been one not long before), I passed through the marshes to a certain hidden place I knew. It was a small meadow clearing just above the banks of one of the numberless crystal-clear creeks that wandered mazily through the reeds. In midday the meadow lay half in sun and half in shade, so that it was a place of comfort whatever the temperature might be. There I threw myself down on the grass to await Silili.

Time passed with agonizing slowness. I worried that Silili had come early and, not finding me there, thought me faithless and left. I worried that she had been sent to Fishweir to make baskets for a season. A thousand horrid possibilities haunted my imagination. But then at last, she stepped into the clearing.

I rose at the sight of her, and she knelt down beside me. We clasped hands fervently. Her eyes shone. When I looked into those eyes, I felt the way the People must have when the first dawn filled the sky with colors and Aruru sent her voice upward to meet them and so sang the first song. The joy I felt then was almost unbearable; it filled me to bursting.

We lay together, as we had every day for almost a month, kissing and fondling each other. Silili's skin was the color of aged ivory and her nipples were pale apricot. Her pubic hair was light and downy, a golden mist over her mons. It offered no more resistance than a cloud when I ran my fingers through it. She stroked my thighs, my chest, the side of my face. Then, blushing and yet not once taking her eyes from mine, she said, "Gil...I'm ready now."

"Are you sure?" It is a measure of how deeply I loved Silili that I asked at all instead of simply taking her at her word. And a measure of how much I wanted her that when I asked I did not stop stroking her gently with one finger, over and over, along the cleft between her legs, fearful that if I removed my hand her desire for me would go with it. "I can wait, if you want."

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"No," she said, "now."

We did then as lovers always do.

Afterward, we lay together talking quietly, sometimes laughing. Inevitably, our conversation turned to what we would be wearing when next we saw each other.

Children, of course, go everywhere naked. But after this, Silili and I would need to wear clothing in public. Tonight she would go to Inanna and beg enough cloth to make a dress, and thus claim for herself the modesty of a grown woman. Like any male my age, I had already made a shirt and trousers and hidden them away against this very day.

Silili brushed her hands down the front of her body, imagining the dress. "What color should it be?" she asked.

"Green, like the forest. Reddish-orange, like the flames of the sun."

"Which I am to be, then — forest or sun? You are as inconstant as the sky, Gil."

"Blue," I said, "like the sky. White, like the moon and the clouds. Red and yellow and blue like the stars. Orange and purple like the sunset or the mountains at dawn." For she was all things to me and, since in my present frame of mind all things were good, all things in turn put me in mind of her.

She made an exasperated noise, but I could tell she was pleased.

It was at that instant that I heard a soft, heavy *thump* on the ground behind me. Lazily, I turned my head to see what it was.

I froze.

An enormous winged lion stood on the bank of the stream opposite us. Its fur and feathers were red as blood. Its eyes were black from rim to rim.

Silili, who in all her life had never feared anything, sat up beside me and smiled at the thing. "Hello," she said. "What are you?"

"Hello," the great beast replied. "What are you? Hello. Hellohellohello." Lifting its front paws in the air, it began to prance about on its hind legs in the drollest manner imaginable. "What are you are what. You are what you are what you are. Hello? Hellello. Lo-lo-lo-lo-lo! Hell you are lo you are. What what what!"

Silili threw back her head and laughed peals of silvery laughter. I

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laughed as well, but uneasily. The creature's teeth were enormous, and it did not seem to me that the cast of its face was at all kindly. "A lion?" Silili asked. "A bird?"

"A bird a bird a bird! A lion a lion a bird!" the beast sang. "You are a lion you are hello what are a bird hello you are a what a what hello. Bird-lion bird-lion lion lion *bird*!" Then he bounded up into the air, snapped out his mighty wings, and, flapping heavily, flew up and off into the sky, leaving nothing behind him but a foul stench, like rotting garbage.

We both laughed and applauded. How could we not?

But when later I returned to Whitemarsh, and my sister came running out from the village to meet me, I raised my hand in greeting and I could not remember what word I normally used in such circumstances. I wracked my brain for it time and again, to no avail. It was completely gone. And when I tried to describe the beast I had seen, I could remember the words for neither "bird" nor "lion."

Still, that strange incident did not stay long in our minds, for that was the summer when Delondra invented dancing. This was an enormous event among our generation not only for its own sake but because this was the first major creation by anyone who was not of the First. As adults we had to spend our days in labor of various sorts, of course, but we met every evening on the greensward to dance until weariness or romance led us away.

Music had been invented by Enlil years before and we had three instruments then: the box lute, the tabor, and the reed pipe. When the evening darkened, we lit pine-tar torches and set them in a circle about the periphery of the dancing ground and so continued until the stars were high in the sky. Then by ones and twos we drifted homeward, some to make love, others to their lonely beds, and still others to weep and rage, for our hearts were young and active and no way had yet been invented to keep them from being broken.

Which is what we at first thought had happened when Mylitta, who had hours before wandered off into the woods with Irra, returned in tears. (This was late in the summer, when we had been dancing for months.) Mylitta and Irra were lovers, a station or distinction we of the second generation had created on our own. None of the First had lovers, but rather

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coupled with whoever caught their fancy; but we, being younger and, we thought, wiser, preferred our own arrangements. Even though they did not always bring us joy.

As, we thought, now. Everybody assumed the worst of Irra, of course. But when Mylitta's friends gathered around to comfort her, it turned out that she had been frightened by some creature she had seen.

"What was it like?" Silili asked.

"White," Mylitta said, "like the moon. It came up from the ground like...something long and slithery that moves its head like this." She moved her hand from side to side in a sinuous, undulating motion.

"A snake?" somebody said.

Mylitta looked puzzled, as if the word meant nothing to her. She shook her head, as if dismissing nonsense and, still upset, said, "Its mouth was horrible, with teeth set in circles. And it...and it...*talked!*"

Now the forgotten lion came to my mind again and, apprehensively, I asked, "Did it say anything? Tell us what it said."

But to this Mylitta could only shake her head.

"Where is Irra?" Silili asked.

"He stayed behind to talk some more."

There was then such a hubbub of talk and argument as only the young can have. In quick order we put together a party to go after our friend and bring him back to us safe. Snatching up knives and staves — knives had been invented long ago, and even then staves had been employed as weapons — we started toward the woods.

Then Irra himself came sauntering out of the darkness, hands behind his back, grinning widely. Mylitta ran to his side and kissed him, but he pushed her playfully away. Then he made a gesture that took in all of us, with our knives and staves and grim expressions, and raised one eyebrow.

"We were going to look for you."

"Mylitta said there was a..." With Irra's eyes boring into mine, I could not think of the word for snake. "One of those long, slithery things. Only large. And white."

"Why won't you talk?" Mylitta cried. "Why don't you say anything?"

Irra grinned wider and wider. And now a peculiar thing happened. His face began to glow brighter and brighter, until it shone like the moon.

He held out his hand, fingers spread. Then he squeezed it into a fist.

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When he opened it again, the fingers had merged into one another, forming a smooth brown flipper. "The...whatever...showed me how to do this."

Nobody knew what to make of his stunt. But then Mylitta started crying again, and by the time we had her soothed down, Irra was gone and it was too late for dancing anyway. So we all went home.

AFTER THAT EVENING, strange creatures appeared in more and more profusion at the edges of our settlements. They were never the same twice. There was a thing like an elephant but with impossibly long legs, like a spider's. There was a swarm of scorpions with human faces that were somehow all a single organism. There was a ball of serpents. There was a bird of flame. They arrived suddenly, spoke enigmatically, and then they left.

Every time somebody talked to one of these monsters, words vanished from his or her vocabulary.

Why didn't we go to our elders? The First had powers that dwarfed anything we could do on our own. But we didn't realize initially that this was anything to do with *them*. It seemed of a piece with the messy emotional stuff of our young lives. Particularly since, for the longest time, Irra was at the center of it.

We did not have a name for it then, but Irra had become a wizard. He had a wizard's power and a wizard's weirdness. He would pop up without warning — striding out of a thicket, jumping down from a rooftop — to perform some never-before-seen action, and then leave. Once he walked right past Mylitta and into her house and before her astonished eyes urinated on the pallet where she slept! Another time, he rode across the fields on a horse of snow, only half-visible in the white mist that steamed off its back, and when the children came running madly out to see, shouting, "Irra! Irra!" and "Give us a ride!" he pelted them with snowballs made from the living substance of his steed, and galloped off, jeering.

These were troubling occurrences, but they did not seem serious enough to warrant bothering the First over. Not until I lost Silili.

I was working in the marshes that day, cutting salt hay for winter fodder. It was hot work, and I was sweating so hard that I took off my tunic

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and labored in my trousers alone. But Silili had promised to bring a lunch to me and I wanted her to see how hard I could work. I bent, I cut, I straightened, and as I turned to drop an armful of hay I saw her standing at the edge of the trees, staring at me. Just the sight of her took my breath away.

I must have looked pleasing to her as well for, without saying a word, she took my hand and led me to that same meadow where we first made love. Wordlessly, then, we repeated our original vows.

Afterward, we lay neither speaking nor touching each other. Just savoring our closeness. I remember that I was lying on my stomach, staring at a big, goggle-eyed bullfrog that sat pompously in the shallows of the stream, his great grin out of the water, his pulsing throat within, when suddenly the ground shook under us and a grinding noise filled the air.

We danced to our feet as something like an enormous metal beetle with a kind of grinder or drill in place of a head erupted from the ground, spattering dirt in all directions. The gleaming round body was armored with polished iron plates. A crude mouth opened at the end of an upheld leg and said, "Who." Then, "Are." And finally, "You?"

"Go away," I said sulkily.

"Gooooooooo," it moaned. "Waaaaaaaaaay. Aaaaaaaaa."

"No!" I pelted the thing with clods of dirt, but it did not go away. I snatched up a stick and broke it across the beetle's back, to no visible effect. "Nobody wants you here."

"Nooooooobody." Its voice was rough and metallic, like nothing I had ever heard before. It reared up on its four hind legs, waving its front pair in the air. "Waaaaaaants." I smashed a stone against one of those hind legs, snapping it off at the joint. Untroubled, it snatched up Silili with its forelegs. "Yooooooouuuuu!"

Then the monstrosity disappeared into the forest.

It had all happened too quickly. For the merest instant I was still, stunned, unable to move. And in that instant, faster than quicksilver, the beetle sped through the trees so nimbly that it was gone before I could react. Leaving behind it nothing but Silili's rapidly dwindling scream.

"Silili!" I cried after her. "Come back! *Silili!*"

Which is how, fool that I was, I lost her name.

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Afterward, however, I discovered that the limb I had torn from the beetle was that same one that held the creature's mouth. "Where is she?" I demanded. "Where has she been taken to?"

"Ur," it said. "Dum." A long silence. "Heim."

I ran back to Whitemarsh. There was an enormous copper disk, as tall as I was, leaning against the side of the redsmith's forge. I seized a hammer and began slamming on it to raise a great din and bring out everyone within earshot. They say that this was the first alarm that was ever sounded, but what did I care for that?

All the village came running up. Several of the First — Ninsun, Humbaba, two or three others — were among them.

I flung down the hammer.

"Girl!" I cried. Then, shaking my head, "Not girl — woman!" I had questioned the beetle-limb most of the way back to Whitemarsh before concluding that I would learn nothing useful from it and throwing it away in disgust. The interrogation had been a mistake, however, for it half-drained me of language. Now, because I had lost the word *lover*, I slapped my chest. "Mine." And, howling, "Gone, gone, gone!"

A gabble of voices, questions, outraged cries rose up from the crowd. But Ninsun *slammed* her hands together and silenced them all with a glare. Then she folded herself down and patted the ground beside her.

"Sit," she said to me. "Tell."

It took time and labor, but I eventually made myself understood.

"When did this begin?" Ninsun asked and, when everybody began talking at once, "You first," she said, pointing. "Then you. Then you." The story that she eventually stitched together was clumsily told, but the old woman nodded and clucked and probed until it had all been brought to light. At last she sighed and said, "The Igigi have come, then."

"What are the Igigi?" Mylitta asked. My body had caught up with the horror of Silili's loss by then. I was heavy with grief and speechless with despair.

"'Igigi' is just a name we gave to them so we could talk about them."

"Yes, but what *are* they?" Mylitta insisted.

"There are not the words to describe the Igigi."

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A frustrated growl rose up from the assembled young. I noticed the First scowling at each other when this happened.

"It is the Igigi," Ninsun said, "who ruled over us in Urdumheim. Surely I have told you about them before?"

Some of us nodded. Others shook their heads.

"The Igigi are logophages." Ninsun regarded us keenly from under those bushy eyebrows of hers. "Nimrod put much of his power into words, and they make us strong. The Igigi feed upon words in order to deny us that strength. Thus they gain power over us."

"Girl-woman-mine," I reminded her. I flung an arm out toward the forest and then drew it back to me. "Woman-to-me. Woman-to-me!"

"Enmul," Ninsun said. A boy who was known to all for his speed and endurance stepped forward. "Run to the top of Ararat. Bring Nimrod here."

King Nimrod came down from the mountain like a storm cloud in his fury. His hair and robes lashed about him, as if in a mighty wind, and sparks shot out from his beard. "You should have told me this long ago," he said to me, glowering, when Ninsun had told him all. "Fool! What did you think language is *for*?"

Humbly kneeling before him, I said, "Girl-woman-mine." Then I slammed my heart three times to show that I hurt. "Lost-fetch-again!"

With a roar, the king knocked me flat with his enormous fist. When I stood up, he struck me down again. When I stretched out a hand in supplication he kicked me. Finally, when I could not move, Ninsun snapped an order and I was lifted up by the arms and carried away. Radjni and Mammetum laid me down in the shade of a tree, cleaning my wounds and applying mint leaves and mustards to my bruises.

Miserably, I watched as King Nimrod sent runners to every village and outlying house, to gather the People together. Already the First were gathering (they did not need to be sent for), and it was not long before there was such an assembly as had never gathered before nor has since, nor ever will again: all the People in the world.

King Nimrod then spoke: "Oh ye of little faith! I sang high the mountain so that it might be a fortress and protection for the People in times of peril. When I was done, Ararat was to tower so high it would

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touch the sky, where no demon would dare go. Then would we have made our homes there and been safe forever.

"Alas, our enemies have arrived before my work was done. The slopes of Ararat will slow but not stop them. So before their armies converge upon us, we must prepare to defend ourselves."

All this I narrate as things I have heard and know to be true. Yet, even though I was there, Nimrod's speech was incomprehensible to me. This is what I actually heard:

faith! mountain
fortress protection Ararat
tower demon
safe forever.
Alas enemies Ararat
armies converge

After a hurried consultation among the First, Shaleb the Scribe began sketching plans for a defense. With a gesture, he stripped the land before him of vegetation. Enkidu handed him a staff and he drew a circle: "Ararat," he said. Along its flanks, he drew three nested semicircles: "Curtain wall. Barbican. Palisades." Squiggly lines made a river. He drew a line across it: "Dam." Other lines represented streams. He reshaped them: "Channels."

So it began. At King Nimrod's orders, we cut down trees and built palisades. We dug trenches, redirected streams, created lakes. Foodstuffs were brought in and locked away in warehouses we built for that purpose. Weapons were forged. All this was done under direction of the First. Those of the second generation who'd had the least exposure to the Igigi were made overseers and supervisors, in proportion to their ability to understand directions. Those who could follow only the simplest orders were made runners and carriers. Down at the very bottom of the social order were those such as I who could not be trusted to comprehend the plainest commands and so were used as brute labor, hauling logs or lugging stones, driven to obedience by kicks, cuffs, and curses.

I will not dwell upon my misery, for all that it was compounded by being so richly deserved. Suffice it to say, I suffered.

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Then one day a pillar of smoke appeared on the horizon. We put down our shovels and axes — those who were trusted with tools — and as we did so a second pillar arose, and then a third, and a fourth, and a hundredth, until we could no longer count them all. Dark they rose up and wide they spread, until they merged and turned the sky black.

Inanna, who was best-liked of all the First, passed through the camp, handing out strips of cotton cloth. So quick was she that her feet never once touched the earth, and to each one she met she said, "The Igigi are burning the forests. When the smoke comes, fold this cloth like so, dip it in the water, and hold it to your face. This will make breathing easier." When she saw that I did not understand her instructions, she took me by the hand and comprehension flowed through me like a stream of crystal-clear water.

All in an instant, I understood the magnitude of her sacrifice. For the trickle of power that had flowed out of her was gone forever. She would never have it again.

Shocked, I bowed low before her.

My face must have revealed my every thought, for Inanna smiled. "I thank you for your sympathy," she said. "But your gratitude comes too soon. I cannot stay here, holding your hand, and without my touch you will revert to what you were before. But be patient. Be brave. Work hard. And when all is done, there will be a time of healing."

Then she was gone, and with her the temporary gift of understanding.

That night, for the first time, I wept for myself as well as for Silili.

In the morning, walls of flame converged upon us, destroying forests and reed-marshes alike. But Inanna's charm was strong, and Shaleb had so cunningly redirected the waters that the flames could not reach us. Even so, the sun did not shine that day, and when night came, we could see the campfires of the Igigi, ring upon ring of them through the murky distance. Their numbers were legion. My heart grew cold at the sight.

For an instant I felt a bleak and total despair. And in that instant, I leapt up from where I had been lying, exhausted, and seized a rope, looped it around a nearby log, and turned to the nearest supervisor. It was Damuzi, who had never been particularly fond of me.

I snorted, as if I were an ox. Then I tugged at the rope. I looked around me, from one quarter of the camp to another. Then I snorted again.

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Damuzi looked astonished. Then he laughed. He pointed to a far section of our defenses where the palisades were incomplete. His finger moved from palisades to logs, back and forth repeatedly, until I nodded my comprehension: As many logs as I could manage. Mylitta, who, through her frequent exposure to Irra, had become a man-beast like myself, had been watching us intently. Now she leaped up and looped a length of rope around the far side of my log. She looked at me and snorted.

Together we pulled.

THE NEXT DAY, the Igigi had advanced so close that they could be seen, like swarming insects, on the far side of the lake we had created as our first line of defense. Those who could — those with wings or the ability to swim — attacked us directly. A monstrous feathered serpent came twisting through the water and smashed into the lakefront wall with such force that logs splintered and buckled. Meanwhile, creatures that were something like bears and something like squids descended from the sky and tried to seize People in their tentacles.

Though we cast them back, they kept returning. Pain meant nothing to the Igigi and so varied were their forms that it was difficult to find a way to cripple them all. Even King Nimrod was hard pressed to counter them.

It was then that Humbaba came lumbering forward. "Great hunter, draw your bow!" he cried. And when Nimrod had done as he directed, "Point it toward the nearest of the foe. Let loose thy arrow. Speed it toward the abomination's body!"

The arrow sped. When it struck the feathered serpent, the demon threw back its head and howled. Then it fell and did not rise again.

"What wonder is this?" somebody asked.

"It is my greatest gift, for once given it cannot be taken back," Humbaba said. "I call it *death*."

At his direction, we set upon the invaders with sticks and knives and rocks. They fell before our onslaught and, briefly, all was satisfactory. But in the aftermath, there lay one body on the ground which was not that of an Igigi. It belonged to Shullat, who was gentle and fond of animals and of whom nobody ever had a bad word to say.

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Shullat's death saddened us all greatly, for she was the first of the People ever to die.

That same day, shortly after sundown, Atraharsis passed through the camp distributing spears and knives as long as a tall man's arm. These latter were unknown to us before this, and he had to demonstrate their use over and over again, the sweat on his face glistening by the light of our campfires.

He did not offer any to the oxen, of course, for we were no longer People. But I watched carefully and when I thought I understood how the knives were to be used, stood before him and made a coughing sound to get his attention. Then I pointed to the long-knife, made a slashing motion, and said, "Swssh."

Atraharsis stared in astonishment. I gestured in the direction of the Igigi hordes. Then I turned my back on them and, waving my arms in a whimsical fashion, cried, "Uloolaloolaloo!" in as close as I could manage to the demons' nonsense-speech.

Those standing nearby laughed.

I pretended I held a long-knife and spun around. I jabbed. "Swssh!" I became an Igigi again, clutched my stomach, and made "Glugluglug" noises to indicate blood flowing out. Finally, I became myself and, face furious with hatred, hacked and slashed at my imagined foe. "Swssh! Swssh! Swssh!"

Then I pointed to the bundle of long knives in Atraharsis's arms. "Swssh." I held out my hand.

Atraharsis's face darkened.

He aimed a kick at me.

I danced back and nearly fell into the campfire. He advanced upon me, speaking angrily. Out of all he said, I caught only the words "traitor" and "Igigi." But it enraged those listening and they rained blows upon me.

All in a panic, I broke free of the throng and tried to escape their wrath. Jeers and clods of mud flew after me. The children pursued me with sticks.

I was harried across the camp all the way to the outermost palisade. There I slipped through the half-rebuilt gap in the wall created when the feathered serpent had smashed into it. I ran up the new lakefront until it opened out into marshland again, and there I lost my pursuers. For a time

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I wandered, lost and miserable, among the reeds and island copses, with nowhere to go and no place I could stay. Then a pack of seven-tailed wolves that glowed a gentle blue in the moonlight surrounded me and took me captive.

I became a prisoner of the Igigi.

Now began for me the darkest part of that dark era. Every day I was driven along with the other captives to the lakeside across from the First Haven fortifications. The first time, we were lashed with whips that stung like scorpions while we tried desperately to intuit what we were meant to do. Finally, randomly, one of our number began scooping up mud with his hands and the whips moved away from him. We others joined him with hands and flat stones and scraps of wood and soon it became apparent that we were digging a trench to drain the lake.

How often I looked up from my work to stare longingly across that lake! The Igigi continued to attack the People by ones and threes. Sometimes they returned with captives, but more commonly they were slain. Yet they seemed not to learn from this, for they neither lessened nor increased their attacks, nor did they alter their tactics.

Nighttimes, we were herded into a walled enclosure (we had built it ourselves, of course) where we were fed from a trough and slept huddled together like animals. If I'd thought I was an ox before, I was doubly so now, for my fellows were no longer recognizable as People. They had given up all hope of rescue and when I tried to recreate my crude system of snorts and signs with them, they did not respond. They crapped and coupled in the open as the urge took them and pissed right where they stood. Their eyes, when they looked upon me at all, were dull and lifeless.

They had despaired.

Almost, I despaired as well. But the Igigi had taken Silili from me and that meant that she was out here, somewhere, in their vast encampment. So my thoughts were foremost and forever upon her and even when I was most exhausted I never ceased from looking for her. Hopeless though my cause might be, it maintained me when nothing else could.

Then, one evening, Irra came to the slave pens. He was dressed in spotless white blouse and trousers. There was a coiled leather strap in his hand and a knowing smile on his face.

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Reflexively, I tried to cry out his name — but of course that had disappeared from my mind long ago — and managed only a kind of barking sound.

Unhurriedly, Irra tied the strap about my neck. Then, holding one end in a negligent hand, he turned and walked away.

Perforce, I followed.

We walked not toward the dam but through the Igigi encampment. What a foulness they had made of the clean, stream-fed lands! The trees were uprooted and the marsh grasses burnt to stubble and ashes. Craters had been blasted in the earth. The ground was trampled into mud. This did not bother Irra, for he walked a hand's-breadth above it, but there were places where I sank to the knees in cold muck and was half-choked by his impatient tugging on the leash before I could struggle free. Dimly, then, I began to realize that Urdumheim was not a place but a condition...and that, struggle though I might, I was helplessly mired within it.

Eventually we came to a halt in a place that was neither better nor worse than any other in that horrid and despoiled landscape. Here, Irra pulled a small but obviously sharp knife from his pocket. He held up his little finger before my face and made a long and angry speech, not a word of which I understood.

Then he cut off the tip of his finger.

Blood spurted.

Irra thrust the finger-stub at me, and I backed away uncomprehendingly. With a noise of disgust, he pried open my mouth and shoved the gobbet of flesh in. I gagged, but he forced me to swallow.

"Can you understand me now?" he asked.

I could!

"This will only work between the two of us," Irra said sternly. "Do not think you can return to the People now, for you cannot. To them, you will remain as dumb as a stone and their speech shall be to you as the twittering of birds."

"I understand." I almost didn't care, so great was my relief to be able to speak again. I felt as if a part of my mind had been restored to me. I could think clearly for the first time since my capture.

"Then follow me."

* * *

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Deep in the Igigi encampment, we came upon a tremendous fish. It was larger by far than any whale. A silvery film covered the vast, listless eye that stared blindly at the sky from its rotting side. Flies swarmed all about it and the smell was so terrible I almost vomited. Irra had to half-choke me to keep me going. The stench grew worse the closer we got, until we reached the pink gill slit and so passed within.

The interior was opulent beyond imagining. Polished stone floors supported pillars of agate and turquoise and jade, which rose to a vaulted ceiling so high that shadows nested in it. Flambeaux lined the fishbone-ribbed walls and wavering lines of white candles floated high in the air above. Beneath them clay-fleshed homunculi stumped and winged eyeballs flew and giant snails slid, all passing to and fro without any visible purpose amid splendors that dwarfed everything the People had. Such was the power of the Igigi. Yet they had forced their captives to slave in the mud to build what they could have made with a thought!

To the far end of the great room, a sweep of serpentine steps rose to a dais atop which were what at first appeared to be two mounds of garbage, but on approach revealed themselves as crudely built thrones.

We stopped at the foot of the dais, and the figures seated upon the thrones arose.

"Kneel!" Irra whispered urgently. He did not name the two, but by the awe and disgust I felt within me, I knew them for who they were.

The King and Queen of the Igigi advanced to the top of the steps and stared down on us.

The Queen's face was perfection itself, as sweet and beautiful as the dawn of the very first day. She wore a billowing robe of soft scarlet feathers which opened here and there to reveal a body that would have been as ravishing as her face were it not for her breasts, which reached down to the ground and dragged on the floor behind her.

The King was entirely naked, but his legs were jointed wrong, forcing him to walk backward, buttocks-first. He had no head, but when he came to a stop and turned, I saw that his features were on his chest and abdomen, so that when he opened his mouth to speak, his stomach gaped wide and his penis waggled on his chin like a goatee.

The hall hushed in anticipation of his words.

"Brekekekek koax koax!" he cried. "Tarball honeycrat kadaa muil.

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Thrippsy-pillivinx. Jolifanto bambla o falli bambla. Aeroflux electroluxe. Flosky! Beebul trimble flosky! Grossiga m'pfa habla horem. Archer Daniel Midlands codfeather squinks. Spectrophotometer. AK-47. Rauserause-rauserause. Zero commercials *next!*"

The Queen threw back her head and laughed like a hyena.

"They demand to know," Irra said, "what new thing this is that the First have done. We send out our best warriors and they do not return. Why?"

I said nothing.

"Why?" Irra repeated angrily. But still I did not respond.

The Queen looked at the King and yipped sharply twice.

"I don't think we need to be subliminable," the King said. "I think we agree, the past is over. I'm looking forward to a good night's sleep on the soil of a friend. And, you know, it'll take time to restore chaos and order — order out of chaos. But we will. I understand reality. If you're asking me...would I understand reality, I do. There will be serious consequences, and if there isn't serious consequences, it creates adverse consequences. Our enemies never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we. Does that make any sense to you? It's kind of muddled. I understand small business growth. I was one. They misunderestimated me. My answer is bring 'em on."

"He says that if you do not speak voluntarily, you will be made to speak."

I crossed my arms.

The King shrugged. Almost casually, he said, "Pain."

"Paain," the Queen repeated. "Paaaaaiiiinnnn," she moaned. She made it sound as if it were a good and desirable thing. Then she nodded in my direction.

Pain fell on me.

How to describe what I felt then? Perhaps once, when you were chopping wood, your axe took an unlucky bounce off a knot and the blade sank itself in your leg, so that you fell down screaming and all the world disappeared save your agony alone. Maybe your clothes caught fire and when your friends slapped out the flames, the burning went on and on because your flesh was blackened and blistered. You could not reason then. You howled. You could not think of anything except the pain. That was how it was for me. I folded into myself, weeping.

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"Kraw," said the King. "Craaaaaawwwawaw. Craw-aw-wul. Crawl."

Irra looked at me. "Crawl!" he said.

And, pity help me, I did. I crawled, I groveled, I wailed, I pleaded, and when at last my tormentors granted me permission to speak, I told them everything I knew. "It is called death," I said. "Humbaba invented it." And I explained its nature as best I could, including the fact that the People were subject to it as well as the Igigi. It would have been better, far better, had I said nothing. But the pain unmanned me, and I babbled on and on until Irra finally said, "Enough."

Thus it was that I became a traitor.

The next day the war began in earnest. Where before the Igigi had attacked in ones and threes, now they came in phalanxes. Where before they had taken captives, now they sought only to kill. Such were the fruits of my treachery.

The People fought like heroes, every one. They *were* heroes — the first and the best that ever were. They fought as no one had ever fought before or ever will again. Glory shone about their brows. Lightnings shot out of their eyes.

They lost.

Do I need to tell you about the fighting? It was as ugly and confusing then as it is today. There were shouts of anger and screams of pain. Blood gushed. Bodies fell. I saw it all from across the lake where — pointlessly, needlessly — we animals labored to widen the drainage canal. This despite the fact that the lake was half-empty already and its mud flats no hindrance to the attacking Igigi at all. But if we stopped we were whipped, and so we toiled on.

The palisades fell. Then the inner walls behind them.

The People retreated up the mountain. Halfway to the summit they had built a final redoubt and this they held against all the Igigi could throw against them. The sides of Ararat were steep and the way up it narrow, and thus the demons could only attack in small numbers. Always, Nimrod stalked the heights, his great bow in hand, so that they dared not approach by air.

At night, as I was herded back to the slave pens, I could see the lower slopes of Ararat ablaze with fires too numerous to count. These were not

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campfires such as armies build against the cold and to cook their food, for the Igigi needed neither warmth nor sustenance. They were built for no good reason at all, as acts of vandalism. The closer ones flickered as the bodies of the Igigi passed before them, for their numbers were legion.

One evening as the gates to the slave compound slammed shut behind me and I sank to the ground, too tired to struggle through the other animals and fight for food at the trough, it struck me that I was going to die soon and that under the circumstances this might well be no bad thing. As I was thinking these dark thoughts, the gates opened again and in rode Irra on a beast that stumbled and struggled to bear up under his weight. He leapt down from his mount and the beast straightened. It was a woman! She was naked as a child, but leather straps had been lashed about her so that her arms were bound tight to her sides. A saddle was strapped to her back, and there was a bit in her mouth.

For a second I thought it was Silili and my heart leapt up with anger and joy. I rose to my feet. Then I recognized her and my heart fell again.

"Mylitta," I said sadly. "You were captured too."

"She cannot understand you," Irra said. "Have you forgotten?"

I had. Now, however, I moved one foot like an ox pawing the ground: Hello.

Mylitta did not respond. Her eyes were dull and lifeless, and so I knew that she had, like so many other captives, given up all hope and sunk down into a less-than-animal state. Either she had been captured in an Igigi raid or — more likely, it seemed to me — she had slipped away to look for her lover. And, finding him, been treated thus.

I do not think I have ever hated another human being as in that instant I hated Irra.

"Stop staring at the beast!" Irra commanded. "Nimrod broods upon the mountaintop. Our King and Queen believe he contemplates some sorcery so mighty that even he fears its consequences. They feel his growing resolve upon the night winds. So he must be stopped. It is their command that you kill him."

"Me?" I struggled against the urge to sink back to the ground. "I can barely stand. I'd laugh if I had the strength for it."

"You shall have all the strength you need." Irra drew a peeled willow wand from his tunic and with it struck me between the shoulder blades.

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I grunted and bent over double as enormous wings of bone and leather erupted from my back. When I straightened, I saw that Irra had given himself bat-wings as well.

"Follow!" he cried, and leapt into the air.

Involuntarily, I surged after him. Below me, poor Mylitta dwindled into an unmoving speck and was lost among the other captive slaves. That was the last that ever I saw her.

We flew.

UNDER OTHER circumstances, it would have been a glorious experience. Flying was easier than swimming. My muscles worked surely and strongly, and the wind felt silky-smooth under my wings. But the lands we flew over were ugly and defiled. Pits and trenches had been gouged into them for no purpose whatsoever. A constellation of trash-fires that had once been our crofts smoldered under us. The very clouds overhead were lit a sullen orange by them.

"Look upon your work," I said bitterly.

Irra swooped downward, drawing me involuntarily after him, so that we skimmed low over the mud-flats of the half-drained lake. They were littered with corpses. "Behold *yours*," he said. "And tell me — whose creation is the more monstrous?"

To this I had no response.

We flew in a wide circle around Ararat, in order to approach the redoubt from its less defended side. For hours we flew. From my lofty vantage I could see the multitudes of invaders infesting and defiling the land below. Their numbers took my breath away. It is scant exaggeration to declare that there was a nation of monsters for each one of the People. I did not see how we could possibly prevail. But at last, in the long gray hour of false dawn, we alit in the steep and disputed mountainside between the People's final fortress and the Igigi encampments. There, at a touch of Irra's wand, my wings folded themselves back into my body. Without dismissing his own wings, he proceeded to take a long and leisurely leak against a nearby boulder.

Finally, I spoke. "Mylitta *loved* you! How could you treat her so?"

Irra smiled over his shoulder. "You want reasons. But there are none.

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Even this stone is wiser than you are." He turned, still pissing. I had to jump backward, almost spraining an ankle, to avoid being sprayed. "You see? The stone knows that the world is what it is, and so it endures what it must. You hope for better, and so you suffer." Done, he tucked himself in and said, "Wait here." Then he threw himself into the air again, soaring higher and higher until he was no larger than a flea. Up he went and down he came. Yet as he drew closer he dwindled in size, so that he grew no larger to the eye. When he reached his starting place, he was as small as a midge. Three times he buzzed around my head.

Then he flew into my ear.

With a dreadful itching sensation that made me claw desperately at my head, Irra burrowed deep into my brain. Coming at last to rest, he said, "Climb upward. When you reach the redoubt, its defenders will recognize you and let you in. If your actions displease me, I will treat you *thus*."

I screamed as every bone in my body shattered and blood exploded from all my orifices.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the pain was gone. I was still standing, and unhurt. Everything but the pain had been an illusion. "That was but a warning," Irra said. "If you disobey or displease me in the least way, I will visit such torments upon you that you will remember the Igigi Queen's ministrations with fond nostalgia. Do you understand?"

Abjectly, I nodded my head.

"Then go!"

Like a mouse, I crept up the mountain's flank, using its trees and bushes for cover when I could and furtively clinging to the bare rock when I could not. Once, I caught a glimpse of Nimrod's gigantic figure as he stood at the topmost peak, back to me, contemplating the war below. His power was a palpable thing, and in that instant I felt sure that Irra's cause was hopeless, for his merest glance, were it to fall upon me, would have burnt me to ashes. Simultaneously, I experienced an involuntary lifting of my spirits, for the upper slopes of Ararat were untouched by the Igigi and the scent of the pines was clean and invigorating. I began to hope and, hoping, began to scheme. The redoubt, when we reached it, was less a thing than a congeries of defenses — here a wall, there a scarp at the top of which defenders stood with piles of stones. If the mountain had been taller and steeper, the People could have held it forever. But I had seen the

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Igigis' swarming millions and knew that inevitably Ararat must fall. Nevertheless, when I came strolling up King Nimrod's path, whistling and swinging my arms as Irra had directed me to do, I was waved on upward by the guards after the most cursory of examinations.

I was home again.

Despite everything, it felt wonderful.

The People were everywhere working urgently. Shelters were being built and defenses strengthened. Sparks flew upward from the smithies and baskets of apples and cattail roots were hustled away into newly dug caves. Most astonishing of all, the oxen were People once more! I saw them carrying long-knives and spears and huddled over plans for the defenses, arguing in grunts and snorts. They were clapped on the shoulder in passing by others who clearly could not understand them, and there were even those — I noticed them, though Irra did not seem to — who could speak both tongues. One tall woman strode by with a war-trident over her shoulder, singing words that sounded like nothing I had ever heard before. Clearly, the oxen-speech had evolved.

I was but newly arrived when my old friend Namtar rushed up and, dropping an armful of long-knives on the ground, hugged me.

I pawed the ground with one foot: Hello.

Namtar made a cage of one hand and whistled frantically like a captive bird. Then, opening the hand, he trilled like that same bird escaping. Finally, he said, "Eh?" Meaning: How had I escaped?

I slammed one fist into the other. Holding my hands out as if throttling a monster's neck, I twisted them. "Snap!" I lied: I fought my way free.

Namtar grinned appreciatively. Then he made a noise — "Shhhweeoo, shhhweeoo!" — like the hurrying wind and pointing first to me and then to the swords, made a carrying gesture. He lifted his voice in a sweet, clear note, which could only refer to she who had invented song: He had to hurry. Would I bring these things to Aruru?

I snorted assent, and he was gone.

"That was well done," Irra said from within my ear. "Walk briskly. Wait until nobody is watching. Then get rid of this junk."

I dumped the long-knives on a dung heap, and threw an armload of hay over them so that no one would know. Soon after, somebody called me to

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her and gave me another chore. So went my day. I worked my way up the slope, smiling cheerfully (for Irra punished me if I was anything less than upbeat), accepting whatever work was given me and then abandoning it when I could and performing it with apparent enthusiasm when I could not. Three steps forward, two steps back. By degrees, I pushed toward Ararat's summit.

At midday I ate a meager lunch of two taro-cakes and an apple while sitting at the top of a short cliff. It was not far to its bottom, I reflected, only five body-lengths or so, yet the fall would certainly be enough to kill me.

Though he could not read them, Irra was able to intuit my thoughts. "Cast yourself off," he suggested mockingly. "If you die, so will I and Their Anarchic Majesties' plans will come to nothing."

I shivered involuntarily at the awfulness of his suggestion. For, wretched as I was, I did not wish to die. Nobody truly knows what death is, and so we fear it above all things. Moreover, my dread was all the greater for the idea of death being so new to me.

And yet — was it an altogether ignoble idea?

Irra, I reasoned, taunted me because he thought that I would not — that I *could* not — kill myself, and surely this was an understandable thing to assume since nobody had ever done so before. But after all I had seen and experienced, nothing seemed impossible to me anymore. I went to the very brink of the precipice and looked down. I thought of the People and how much I loved them. I thought of Nimrod, their bulwark and strength. I thought of my joyless existence. But mostly I thought of Silili, lost to me forever. Then I did the bravest thing I had ever done in all my life.

Light and giddy with relief and fear, I stepped off.

Or, rather, I tried to.

My feet would not obey me. Will it though I might, I could not take that one crucial step forward. Deep within my ear, Irra laughed and laughed. "You see? I can control your actions. Never forget that."

All this time I had been thinking, and the more I thought, the less plausible it seemed that when I finally stood face to face with King Nimrod, I would defeat him in combat. A hundred such as I could not have done so. It did not matter what magics and powers Irra might have. The very idea was absurd.

Now I was angry enough to say so.

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Irra was unmoved. "Humbaba invented death," he said complacently. "Between them, the Igigi and the People invented war. Great works come in threes. You and I, Gil, will create a third and final novelty, and in some ways it will be the greatest of all, for where the others are universal and impersonal, this will be singular and intimate."

"Will we?"

"Oh, yes, I call it *murder*."

Irra explained his intent. I was unimpressed. "How does this differ from simply killing somebody?"

"By its treachery. You will approach Nimrod with smiles and salaams. You will oil and braid his hair for him, all the while praising his wisdom and his strength. Then, with his back turned and he unsuspicious, you will pick up a rock and smash it down upon his head with all your might."

The picture he drew sickened me for I could imagine it all too well: The weight of the rock in my hands. The unsuspecting king. The sound of that great skull splitting. And afterward, his blood gushing. I would give anything not to have this crime on my hands. But Irra had already taught me that pain could render me helpless before it. I sobbed wordlessly.

"Come. We have mighty deeds to accomplish."

Irra walked me away from the cliff.

THE SUN was sinking in the west by the time I found myself standing outside a line of new-dug storage caves near the top of the redoubt. Only a steep and stony path separated me from the summit of Ararat, where King Nimrod stood thinking his dark thoughts alone. I put down the basket of bread I had carried hither. From one of the caves I retrieved a jug of oil.

Nobody was looking. I carried the oil and a loaf of bread upward.

Though Nimrod was king and mage, the crest of Ararat was stony and bare. No advisors waited upon him, nor was there any furniture of any sort. He sat brooding upon a rock outcrop, his bow and quiver at his feet. A goatskin of water rested in his shadow, along with a shallow clay bowl for him to drink from. And that was all.

"I remember you, little one," the king rumbled, glancing down at me. "Whatever became of your lover, your woman-to-me?"

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Irra whispered: "He wills comprehension upon you. You may reply."

I made a bird of my hands and flew it off into the sky. "Chree!" I said, in imitation of its cry. Gone.

King Nimrod looked sad at that. He reached out one tremendous hand, closed it lightly on my shoulder, and squeezed gently. I thought he would say something consoling, then, and the very thought of him doing so when I had come to kill him nauseated me. But he said only, "Why are you here?"

I proffered the bread.

King Nimrod accepted it. The loaf was large enough to feed three ordinary men, but it looked small in his hand. He began to eat, staring moodily into the distance. Though the invaders had destroyed the trees and rushes, they could not make the waters go away, and so the setting sun filled the land with reflected oranges and reds, rendering it briefly beautiful again.

After a long silence Nimrod spoke to me as one might to a beloved dog — affectionately, but expecting neither comprehension nor response. He was speaking to himself, really, sorting out his thoughts and feelings. "Behold the world," he said. "For a time it was our garden. No more. When Humbaba introduced death, I thought it an evil that might be endured and later undone. For though I cannot negate its effects and those who have died will never return to us, yet I have power to put an end to death. It would drain me completely to do so. But afterward, nobody would ever die again.

"Alas, the world is become a wasteland and there is no way back into the garden. Our choice now is enslavement or death. There is no third way."

I thought that Irra would make his play then, while Nimrod was distracted. But he was cannier than that. Perhaps he noticed some lingering trace of vigilance in the king. Perhaps, knowing that he would have but one opportunity, he was taking no chances. In any event, he waited.

"Ah, child! I am contemplating a great and terrible crime. Would you forgive me for it, if you understood its cost? For henceforth, every man and woman must grow old and die. Is slavery truly worse than that? Yet so great is my hatred for the Igigi that I would rather you and I and everyone else die and turn to dust than that we should submit to them again."

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I could not bear to look at the king, knowing what I was about to do. So I stared down at the ground instead. There was the slightest motion in the gloom as a small and torpid animal shifted itself slightly.

It was a toad.

In that instant, a plan flashed into my mind. Casually, so as not to alert Irra, I squatted and picked up a stone. Then I cleared my throat: Watch.

King Nimrod glanced incuriously at me.

Forgive me, little brother, I thought, and I smashed the toad with the stone.

Beaming, I said, "Squirp!" In imitation of the sound it made.

Nimrod's face was a wall of granite. "Never do that again," he said. And, when I flung out an arm indicating all the lands below, infested with demons and suffering and death, "Yes, the world is full of cruelty. Let us not add to it."

He turned away.

Irra was furious. But in Nimrod's presence, he dared not punish me. "This is no time for playing games!" he cried. "After we have done our great deed, I promise you that there will be suffering enough for everyone and that if you want to be among the tormentors, that honor will be yours. But for now, you must think of nothing but our goal and how to reach it. Pick up the oil."

I did.

Standing before the king, I held up the jug in one hand and a comb which I had stolen earlier in the day in the other. I gestured toward his beard. Nimrod nodded abstractedly, so I poured oil into my hands and then, rubbing them together, applied it. I had to stand on tiptoe to do so. When his beard was fragrant and glossy, I began combing it out. Finally, I braided it in many strands, as befit a ruler of his dignity.

I had just finished when, with sudden resolution, King Nimrod stood. "I fear you will curse me every day of your short life for what I am about to do, little one," he said. His words were an almost physical force. I did not need Irra to tell me that he was willing comprehension upon me. "Yet I see no alternative. So it shall be done. This will take all my power and concentration, so I must ask that you not disturb me before it is finished."

At Irra's direction, I tugged my hair and made braiding gestures. "Eh?"

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Nimrod laughed gently, as one might at the antics of a child. "If it makes you happy."

Closing his eyes, King Nimrod stretched out his arms to either side, palms upward. His fingers flexed, as if grasping for something in the air, and then clenched as if grasping that intangible thing. A low sound escaped from somewhere deep within his chest. It might have been the mountain talking. A shudder passed through his body, and then Nimrod stood as motionless as the moon before Humbaba had set it in the sky. His face was grim as granite.

After a few minutes, drops of blood appeared on his forehead.

"Go!" Irra whispered urgently.

I picked up a large rock and climbed to the top of the low crag behind the king. There, I set the rock down and, standing beside it, began to oil and comb his hair.

Thunder rolled in the distance, then fell silent. But there was an uneasiness to the silence. It was like unto a distant sound too vast and low to be heard that nevertheless can be felt in the pit of one's stomach and in the back of one's skull. Time passed. The sun touched the horizon and a thin line of liquid gold spread to either side faster than quicksilver.

"What is he doing?" Irra fretted. "What is he *doing*?"

I shrugged, and continued my work.

Never had the sun moved below the edge of the world so quickly. All the land beneath it was an oily darkness, as if something were moving there unseen. Perhaps, I thought, Nimrod was calling great armies of beasts to eat the Igigi. Perhaps he was turning the marshes to tar, to envelop and swallow up our enemies. If such was his contemplated crime — the death of billions — I did not care. Let it happen! Yet the tension in the air intensified as if somewhere, too far away to be heard, a giant were silently screaming.

Nimrod was a statue. The blood from his brow ran down his face and pooled at his feet.

Then the horizon *bulged*.

Deep in the fastness of my mind, Irra cried in a tone of mingled horror and awe, "He is calling in the ocean! He is commanding it to come to Ararat."

I passed the comb through King Nimrod's hair over and over again, smoothing out the tangles. "So?"

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"It will roll over the armies below. It will kill the King and Queen and all their servants!"

"Good. Then there will be a cleansing."

"There is still time!" I hopped down from the rock on which I stood, dropping the comb. I bent down to seize the rock in both hands. With a mighty effort, I raised it up to my chest. None of this had been my doing. Indeed, I tried desperately to resist it. But Irra had seized control of my body.

If Irra could control my body now, that meant he could always have done so. There had been no need for him to drive me with threats and pain. He had only done so in order to make me complicit in his guilt and thus increase my suffering, so that he might enjoy my revulsion and shame.

King Nimrod towered above me. With a jerk, Irra raised the stone up above my head. I gasped in pain.

That was the extraordinary thing. I had gasped in pain. Irra had not made me gasp. I had simply done so. Which meant that he controlled only those parts of my body he set his thoughts to controlling. All else was still mine.

I licked my lips to test my theory. And it worked. My mouth remained my own.

"*Squirp!*" I cried as loudly as I could.

Had Nimrod turned to see why I had made such an extraordinary noise, he would have died then and there, for already the stone was descending upon his head. But I had taught him the meaning of my new word, and so he instantly apprehended my warning. Using only a small fraction of his power, the mighty wizard caused tree branches to sprout from his head and shoulders and back. They burst through his skin and clothing. With dazzling swiftness, they divided and multiplied, the end of each branch and twig putting out a long, sharp thorn.

My stone crashed down into the tangled thorn-tree, snapping limbs but coming nowhere near King Nimrod's body, motionless at its center. Twisted black branches grew around me in a cage. The thorns grasped me tightly and I was flung high into the air.

A despairing wail escaped my lips. I did not know if it came from myself or from Irra.

Then, with a roar like the end of the world, I fell into darkness.

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* * *

When I came to, it was morning and Irra's body lay on the ground beside me. I sat up and touched his throat. It was stone cold. Irra was dead.

Sore and aching though I was, I could not help but feel glad.

The sunlight was brighter than I remembered ever seeing it, and the air smelled of salt. I stared down the slopes of Ararat and for the first time in my life I saw the ocean. It sparkled and danced. White gulls flew above it with shrill cries. To one side, fierce waves crashed against the mountainside with a thunder and boom that said they had come to stay. First Haven was a seaport now and its inhabitants would henceforth be fishermen and sailors as well as hunters and crofters.

The Igigi were nowhere to be seen.

King Nimrod sat hunched nearby, his head resting in his hands. But when I tried to hail him, nothing came from my mouth but a wordless cry. So by this token I knew that our first language — the one that Nimrod had invented to deliver us from Urdumheim — was gone forever, drowned with our demonic foes.

At the sound of my voice, Nimrod stood. To my surprise, when he saw me he grinned broadly. He pawed the ground with one foot, as might an ox. Meaning: Hello. Then he rubbed his hands together and snorted: Let's get to work.

Uncomprehendingly, I watched as Nimrod stooped to pick up a stone from the ground. He held it out toward me. "*Harri*," he said. "*Harri*."

Then, like the sun coming out from the clouds, I understood. He was creating a new language — not a makeshift thing like my oxen-speech, but something solid and enduring.

"*Harri*," I said.

The king clapped me approvingly on the shoulder.

Then he went down the mountain to teach the People language for a second time.

Thus began the Great Work. For shortly thereafter, Nimrod set us to work building upon the base of Ararat a tower so tall that it would reach to the sky, and so large that a hundred generations would not suffice to complete it. Indeed, our monarch explained, it was entirely possible that the tower never *would* reach completion. But this did not matter. For within the tower a thousand languages would bloom and those languages,

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through exposure to each other, would be in constant flux and variation, every profession creating its specialized argot and every new generation its own slang. Like the tower itself, each language would be a work forever in progress and never completed. So that if the Igigi returned, they could never again prevail over us, though they stuffed their stomachs so full of language that they burst. In token of which, we named the tower Babel — "Mountain of Words."

Thus ends my story.

Except for one last thing.

One day, when I was working in the fields, Silili returned from the forest. She was scratched and bruised and filthy from living like an animal, and half-starved because unlike those who are born animals, she was not good at it. One of her fingers was crooked, for it had broken and not set well. She was naked.

I froze motionless.

Silili shivered with fear. She took a step into the field, and then retreated back to the shadow of the trees. Whether she remembered me at all, I could not say. But she was as wild and shy as any creature of the woods, and I knew that a sudden movement on my part would drive her away and I might never see her again. So slowly, very slowly, I crouched down and groped with a blind hand for the wicker basket in which I had brought my midday meal.

I opened its lid and reached within. Then I stood.

I held out a yam to her. "*Janari*," I said. This was our new word for food.

Timidly, she approached. Three times, she almost bolted and ran. But at last she snatched the yam from me and ravenously began eating it.

"*Janari*," I repeated insistently. "*Janari!*" And finally, "*Janari*," she replied.

It was a beginning.

All this happened long ago, when I was young and there was only one language and People did not die. All things were new in those days and the world was not at all like what it is today.

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F&SF COMPETITION #74

"Adapted"

COMPETITORS of the "Adapted?" competition had to take a well-known book of fiction and adapt the plot for an audience versed in genre fiction.

I was deeply impressed with the range of titles for this competition. It seems *F&SF* readers are familiar with a wide range of classics, such as Plutarch, Shakespeare, Dumas, Pushkin, and, um, Dan Brown.

I expect to see some of these stories at the movie theater any day now....

NOTE: *Always* include your address. How else can we give you prizes?

FIRST PRIZE:

Oedipus T-Rex (Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, with thanks to *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton)

A young Tyrannosaurus's happy, tourist-eating days on a tropical island preserve are shattered with the shocking revelation that his suicidal thoughts and autoerotic habits both stem from the fact that, as a clone, he is technically both his own father and mother.

—Charles Schmidt
Fridley, MN

SECOND PRIZE:

"Serving Tiffanies at Breakfast" ("Breakfast at Tiffany's" by Truman Capote, with thanks to "To Serve Man" by Damon Knight)

Holly was a country girl trying to break into the Manhattan socialite scene when the aliens arrived with their messages of peace. She paid them little attention until they opened an ultra-exclusive day spa. Coincidentally, an alien restaurant, serving low-fat entrees, opened the same day.

—Hans Christian Nelson
Kincheloe, MI

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Orbit (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey)

McMurphy convinces guards he is crazy to avoid spending time in an asteroid prison. He is sent to an off-world asylum where his defiant attitude brings hope to the alien patients. But robot Nurse Ratched drives him mad with methodical analyzing and error messages.

—Tara Habenicht
North Ridgeville, OH

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Möbius Dock (*Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville)

Captain Ahab, demoniacally possessed with his quest to find the way-station he believes can catapult mankind to the other side of the universe, discovers, too late, that he and his throttled crew are already on the other side of the universe.

—R. E. Keeperman
Stony Point, NY

DISHONORABLE MENTION:

Of Mice and Wookiees (*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck)

George Solo's life would be simpler if he didn't have to keep Lennie the Wookiee out of trouble. Lennie likes to touch soft things but accidentally crushes his pet Ewok. No one minds a dead Ewok, but George can't protect Lennie when Princess Leia wears a fur bikini.

—Andy Spackman
Springville, UT

F&SF COMPETITION #75: REWRITE-KU

Retell a well-known science fiction or fantasy story in the form of a haiku. (First line, 5 syllables; second line, 7 syllables; third line, 5 syllables.) Limit your expertise to six entries, and try to make them funny. *Example:*

"A Boy and His Dog" by Harlan Ellison:

A boy loves his dog.
Dog is hurt. Needs meat to live.
Dog loves boy's girl — cooked.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by November 15, 2007. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a copy of *Infinity x 2: The Life and Art of Ed and Carol Emshwiller* by Luis Ortiz. Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition #75 will appear in the April 2008 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

TENTACLES OF DAWN, BY ROBERT WILSON (1978)

THERE WAS a time when it seemed as though new paperback imprints appeared nearly every month, most of them lasting a year or less. The latter — like Flagship Books, Book Company of America, Carousel, and Major Books — primarily published genre authors that no one had ever heard of before, and never would hear of again after the imprint disappeared. Major Books, which actually has the distinction of publishing the first novel by Charles L. Grant, published the only book to appear by Robert Wilson, who certainly wasn't Robert Charles or Robert Anton.

Wilson's *Tentacles of Dawn* is a post-apocalyptic novel, one of those in which we don't know until very late in the story just exactly what the apocalypse was. In this case, humanity got lazy and relied so heavily on an artificial intelligence to run the world that it was unable to cope when the AI began to fail. Our hero wakens in a barbaric world filled with Brutemen, the Primitives, the Dark Invaders, and the Deformed, all tribes of mutants. He manages to escape the "clutches of Mo-Tung," tracks down the tentacled Prophetess in his quest to understand his purpose, battles with intelligent, man-sized bats, and eventually confronts the Watcher of the World, which turns out to be the surviving portion of the AI.

Tentacles of Dawn is one of a handful of novels so badly written that readers may take a perverse pleasure in following the protagonist, "the man from the Egg," as he discovers that his destiny is to reawaken a sense of dignity and the urge for progress in a decadent human race.

Actor Rainn Wilson's father reportedly wrote at least one science fiction novel. Could this be it?

—Don D'Ammassa

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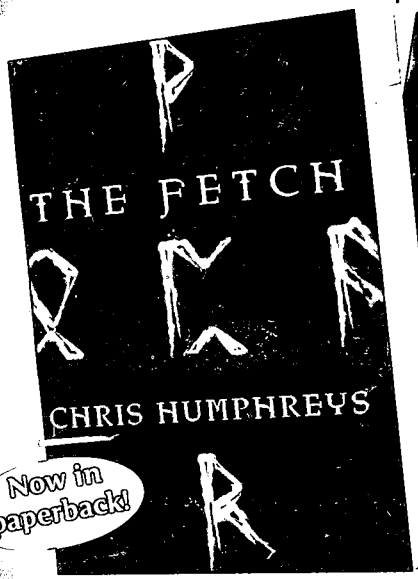

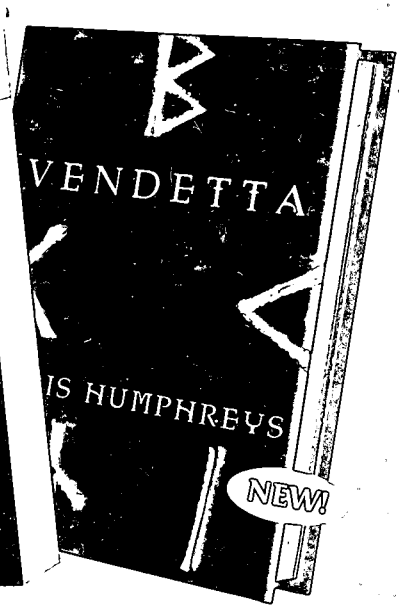

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